Dossier title: The Rise of Precarious Workers

Essay title: *Introduction: Class struggle before class*
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On May 8, 2019, the day before Uber released its IPO (initial public offering), App-based drivers across the world turned off their cell phones and went on strike. These strikes, which took place in dozens of cities from Sydney and Sao Paolo to London and Los Angeles, lasted anywhere from 2-hours to a full day. The goal of the global action was twofold: disrupt the IPO, showing investors and the company that all was not well for workers in the platform economy, while simultaneously illustrating the unified transnational nature of this emerging workers' struggle. One the eve of the strike, six driver-led grassroots organizations across the US released a joint statement entitled *Why we Strike*. In the statement the authors outlined the rationale for the May 8 action:

> We are calling for a National Day of Action Against Uber, Lyft, and all other App-based For-Hire-Vehicle companies on Wednesday, May 8th to shine light on how Uber and Lyft's flawed business model pushes hard-working drivers across the US and the globe into poverty and desperation… Driver-led grassroots organizations across the entire nation are unified in our call for a strike against Uber corporate greed…. Drivers will never back off or fade into the night. Our movement will only grow stronger.[1]

This statement crystallized the militancy and growing solidarity among Uber and Lyft drivers as well as taxi drivers, that feel they are being taken advantage of by an exploitative system. It is likely that we will look back at May 8th as the opening salvo of a protracted struggle between a growing class of precarious workers on one hand and Silicon Valley elites and tech-focused venture capital firms on the other.

The Shape of the Struggle
The growing struggle within the "gig" economy is taking place on two intertwined levels. From one vantage, the fight between platform workers and companies like Deliveroo, Lyft, Handy, Amazon or Care.com is being fought over the roll back of the social contract and the devolving economic situation of workers clawing to survive in a callous economy. This aspect of the struggle was clearly brought to life during May 8, as drivers made cogent demands around bread and butter issues like a minimum wage and a more transparent process around driver deactivation (read: firing).

At the same time however, if we step back and look at the broader historical sweep, we can also see May 8 as a critical moment in the ongoing cycle of "organization, disorganization and reorganization" of the working class (Przeworski, 1977), or what Marx once called the "now hidden, now open fight" between classes. Marx saw this fight between oppressor and oppressed as the engine of history. If we take this argument into account, the struggle between app drivers and Silicon Valley takes on a different hue.

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[1] http://www.nytwa.org/statements/2019/5/13/joint-national-statement-on-why-we-strike-from-may-8th-2019-striking-cities-released-5819

To elaborate, using a historical lens, we can begin to make out the ways that the economic, political and ideological logic of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) is a radical extension of the neoliberal logics of flexibilization, casualization of labor, and the deregulation of corporate enterprises. And building on this, we can trace how the strategies employed by platform companies are an attempt to disorganize this growing segment of precarious workers by harnessing technology and other tools to deskill, disempower and disaggregate.

Accordingly, if we take the same broader historical approach to the emerging fight of platform workers we can see similar patterns. Through the transnational organizing of May 8, and other worker actions such as the strike waves of food couriers throughout the UK and Europe (Cant, 2017), we can see the outlines of a new worker-led resistance. This new figure of resistance has come into focus as platform workers have established new lines of communication, developed a collective understanding of their shared concerns and ultimately worked to build new political organizations through which to advance their collective struggle.

The essays in this issue of Against the Day pick up on some of these broad historical questions of the struggle of workers, the logic of capitalism and the possibility of building organization through different narratives and analyses. The articles detail the transformation in capital and the ways technology has been harnessed by platform companies. The essays also explore, from different vantages, the emerging struggle of platform workers, in particular, as well as the conditions necessary for the development of nascent political organization. And importantly, the essays are written by people on the front lines of these struggles, whether in London, Hyderabad or New York.

The underlying assumption in this series is that the structural dislocation of workers, which has accompanied the rise of platform capitalism, offers a critical moment to examine the dynamic processes of class struggle. More specifically, following E.P. Thompson's famous rejoinder, "class struggle before class," (1978) this special issue examines emergent processes of worker struggle that are *apriori* to workers shared understanding of themselves as a class. Thompson's formulation is instructive, as it offers an orientation towards investigating the struggle between platform workers and Silicon Valley as one critical moment in a historical process.

In the remainder of this brief introduction I will make two broad framing arguments that set up the articles to come. First, building on this argument that we need to see this struggle as part of a broader sweep of history, I detail the rise of the platform capitalism not as the outcome of benign technology as it is often argued, but rather as part of a historical legacy to disempower workers and working-class organization. Following that, I look at how this moment of worker organizing can be seen as an initial stage of an emerging class or class segment. workers in the platform economy are forging novel strategies to rebuild this segment of the working class.

The Invisible Hand of Technology

An age-old narrative has been deployed to explain the rise of the gig or platform economy. Simply put, platform companies developed in dialogue with technological advances ranging from the increase in the power of computing to expanded possibilities of communication and coordination. Recognizing the increased opportunities, entrepreneurs saw an opportunity to harness emerging technologies to wipe out inefficient markets. Thus, the breathless moniker, "market disruptor." As the story goes, through the development of networked apps and seizing on growing class of un and

underemployed, new strategies around the delivery of service were deployed, where customers were able receive goods and services at breakneck speed. Meanwhile a new "on-demand" workforce was cultivated, and workers were afforded the flexibility to operate as mini-entrepreneurs, working on their own time with the "freedom" to choose when and how to work. The underlying implication is that platform capitalism and the resulting labor relations was not the result of human intervention, but instead machines and big data sets are prodding us forward towards a new societal age.

While this narrative is intoxicating, it conjures up a new "invisible hand"—this time the invisible hand of technology, that silently guides social progress. We have heard this trope before. In his social history of automation (1984), historian David Noble discussed the development of technological innovation on the factory floor in New England. In reference to increasing automation in the factory Noble argued, "technology has come to be viewed as an autonomous process, having a life of its own which proceeds automatically, and almost naturally, along a singular path…" Challenging this perspective Noble continued:

> Rather than showing how social potential was shaped by technical constraints, … I examine how technical possibilities have been delimited by social constraints…. For when technological development is seen as politics, as it should be, the very notion of progress becomes ambiguous: What kind of progress? Progress for whom? Progress for what? And the awareness of the ambiguity, this indeterminacy, reduces the powerful hold that technology has had on our consciousness and imagination, and it reduces also the hold upon our lives enjoyed by those whose social power has long been concealed and dignified by seemingly technological agendas." (Noble 1984, xiv-xv)

Bringing this argument to life, Noble outlines how the process of automation within the factory was guided by the desire of managers to take control away from workers and this led to specific decisions about technological design. Thus, technological innovations were made with the specific intent to weaken the power of workers on the factory floor, in short to disorganize the working class.

Following Noble, in her book on digital labor, Ursula Huws (2014) examines the rise of the gig economy and particularly the deteriorating work conditions of gig workers. Huws details three critical moments that have taken place within this broader economic sweep of the last forty years— from the Oil shock of 1973 and the fall the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the economic crisis of 2008. Each of these moments, she argues, has led to social and economic transformations that have altered labor processes, and further weakened the working class. This series of economic transformations set the stage for the gig economy, as gig work—low-wage, temporary, casualized and precarious— quickly emerged as a preferred means of employment.

If we dive further into the transformation of the labor process in the gig economy, and consider the broader historical sweep, it becomes quite clear that many of the key features of the labor process are meant to disorganize and disaggregate the working class. This is made evident in multiple ways. The most obvious is the reclassification of workers as independent contractors without the right to collectively bargain. While this drives down costs, it also importantly hinders the ability of workers to organize and build working class institutions, like unions. Alongside the reclassification of workers is the isolation and alienation of workers in the gig economy. While many workers in past periods shared a collective space, whether it was a factory or a hotel, workers in the gig economy often work

alone, and consequently their ability to connect with one another and build solidarity is compromised. The lack of connectivity and solidarity leads to an alienated and individualistic mindset among workers—which workers must fight against when attempting to build power.

While I don't have the space to elaborate on this argument, following on Noble, it is clear that the emergence of the technologies and labor processes that have come to define the gig economy-- independent contractor status, alienated labor process, algorithmic management, constant workplace surveillance –did not emerge independent of political needs of the owning class. Quite the opposite, the technologies and strategies have been developed that facilitate the accumulation of capital, the isolation and casualization of workers and the dismantling of working-class institutions like labor unions. In short, the disorganization of the working class.

Reorganization?

In Uber's S1 filing to the SEC, the company outlined a series of risks investors should be aware of before buying their stock. These risks ranged from Uber's market position to their brand management and importantly legal cases challenging the independent contractor status of workers. Uber also marked growing worker resistance as a critical challenge to the future of the company. The company detailed: "While we aim to provide an earnings opportunity comparable to that available in retail, wholesale, or restaurant services or other similar work, we continue to experience dissatisfaction with our platform from a significant number of Drivers. In particular, as we aim to reduce Driver incentives to improve our financial performance, we expect Driver dissatisfaction will generally increase…. Further, we are investing in our autonomous vehicle strategy, which may add to Driver dissatisfaction over time, as it may reduce the need for Drivers. Driver dissatisfaction has in the past resulted in protests by Drivers, most recently in India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Such protests have resulted, and any future protests may result, in interruptions to our business."[2]

Here, in dry legal terms, Uber outlines the possibility of worker organizing and driver-led resistance as one of the key risks to the long-term success of the company. And, as if rising at the appointed hour, drivers coordinated their transnational strike on May 8, in part countering Uber's S1 filing and the launch of the IPO. From Nairobi to Nottingham, workers turned off their apps and withdrew their labor in an effort to exercise their collective power. As we seek to reckon with this moment as part of the cycle of class struggle, it is important to return to EP Thompson. Explaining his dynamic understanding of class, Thompson argued: "classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle… on the contrary people find themselves in a society determined in structured ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation, (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues, and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in a real historical process." (1978: 149)

Thompson's insight offers important context for understanding the emerging struggle of workers in the platform economy. First and foremost, the struggle in the gig economy is not

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2 https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1543151/000119312519103850/d647752ds1.htm

foreordained, but rather it is a historical unfolding. This growing class of workers— from package delivery drivers to nannies and food couriers— find themselves in exploitative circumstances and they have begun to organize and fight back. And the struggle is both against the exploitation, but also against a labor process that alienates and disorganizes workers. And, traditional labor unions have largely watched from the sidelines, thus a new breed of worker organization has emerged. This new organizational form is indicative of the moment of struggle we are in. The organizations are nascent and militant and they are forging novel lines of communication among workers as they fight Silicon Valley.

Whether platform workers are able to harness technology and their shared conditions to forge novel worker-led organizations is a critical question. And moreover, whether this emerging class of platform workers can organize and build the power necessary to fight companies and the transforming logic of capital will determine whether we are watching the reorganization of the working class.

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