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# Organising and struggling in a continent: the politics of app-drivers and couriers in Brazil

Caetano Patta Barros\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Postdoctoral researcher at Núcleo Direito e Democracia do Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (NDD/CEBRAP) – R. Morgado de Mateus, 615. Vila Mariana, São Paulo – SP, Brasil. CEP 04015-051, Brazil

## Abstract

Since the 2010s, digital platforms have transformed the reality of work and rights in a global context of crisis. In a scenario of recession, with high rates of unemployment, underemployment and indebtedness, Brazil has become a relevant market for location-based apps, especially in the ride-hailing and delivery sector, reaching the mark of 1.5 million app drivers and couriers. Their routines are characterised by deregulation, algorithmic management, lack of rights, physical and property risks, and partial autonomy and self-management. These workers have built powerful grassroots movements in conflict with governments, corporations and consumers. Brazil covers an area of more than 8 million square kilometres, divided into 26 states plus a federal district and more than 5,000 municipalities, with a high degree of ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity, and a population of more than 200 million. For this reason, it is often referred to as a continental country. The platform workers' demonstrations are widespread throughout the country, which raises relevant questions: what is the extent and rootedness of these movements along the country, how dense and cohesive is it, and how do these articulations take place across the Brazilian "continent"? The first level of description and analysis involves the codification of a database with information on more than 600 demonstrations of app drivers and couriers, distributed in more than 100 municipalities in all regions of Brazil, taking into account geographical, temporal and political aspects. The second level mobilises ethnographic and documentary research to describe and discuss, from a political economy approach, the national character of these movements, focusing on the dimensions of organisation and articulation. The results point to a dense and diverse collective action at the local level, overlaid by social, cultural and territorial relations, as well as determined by the work process and by urban and digital affordances. At the same time, these movements are national but decentralised, with digital resources playing a central role in coordinating and facilitating local articulations. Alongside local associations, Whatsapp groups and YouTube channels integrate federative structures that maintain a distance from established forms of trade unionism. As a contribution to understanding new forms of class power, I suggest that high levels of exploitation, low levels of regulation, the historical defeat of trade unionism and political polarisation can partly explain the highly conflicted and fragmented paths and urgent agendas of app workers, as well as the lack of trust in established institutionalised worker representation.

**Keywords:** class power, platform work, organising, collective action, Brazil

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\*Speaker