The global ‘hot shop’: COVID-19 as a union organising catalyst

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Abstract

There is an emerging narrative that the global COVID-19 pandemic has led to a resurgence of labour activism. Despite this popular narrative, scholars lack empirical data on the relationship between workers’ exposure to the pandemic and their interest in collective representation. Using original survey data from 240 ride-hail drivers, I find that greater exposure to the COVID-19 virus is associated with greater interest in joining a labour union. This article provides the first empirical evidence linking the COVID-19 pandemic to the recent wave of labour activism, giving rise to what I refer to as a ‘global hot shop’ phenomenon.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a wave of strikes and union organising campaigns. The popular press described 2021 as the ‘year of labour strife’ (Widdicome, 2022), and workers previously thought to be beyond the reach of the labour movement, such as those working at Amazon or Starbucks, held recognition elections (Sainato, 2022). Additional evidence for labour’s resurgence can be seen in the strike waves that broke out in the Fall of 2021 (Harrington, 2022), with some universities even developing ‘strike trackers’ to keep track of the work stoppages rippling across the United States (Catt, 2021). Combined, these events gave rise to the conventional wisdom that the pandemic has laid bare the power imbalance in the workplace, giving rise to a new sense of worker solidarity and interest in collective representation (Goodin-Smith, 2020; Herman, 2020; Stringer, 2020).

Despite the narrative that COVID-19 sparked a novel form of labour activism, however, scholars lack empirical data that the pandemic had an effect on workers’ interest in unions or collective organisation. Furthermore, recent evidence has started to raise questions about the...
accuracy of this narrative, such as the continued decline in union density in 2021 (BLS, 2022). Absent data from workers on how the pandemic affected their interest in collective representation, it is unclear if the COVID-19 pandemic affected workers’ views on organised labour or if this narrative is merely emerging from a series of high-profile labour actions.

Using original survey data from ride-hail drivers, this article examines if greater exposure to the COVID-19 virus is associated with greater interest in collective representation. I chose to situate this study in the ride-hail industry for two reasons. First, these workers are uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19 because they work in an enclosed space with customers, making them especially aware of the dangers of working during the pandemic. Second, ride-hail companies did not provide mitigation measures, such as personal protective equipment (PPE), that may have influenced workers’ interest in collective representation. Combined, these factors make ride-hail drivers a ‘critical case’ for examining the relationship between union organising and COVID-19. Using original survey data from 240 drivers, I find there is a positive association between the impact of the pandemic on workers and their interest in collective representation, supporting that the pandemic has caused a unique moment for organised labour.

Finding evidence that the pandemic led workers to seek out collective representation contributes to our knowledge of union organising two ways. First, although extant scholarship focuses on workplace-specific labour conditions to predict workers’ interest in joining a labour union (e.g. Deshpande & Fiorito, 1989; Park et al., 2006; Tetrick et al., 2007; Youngblood et al., 1984), the pandemic creates what I refer to as a ‘global hot shop’—where a sudden, system-wide shock to the industrial system alters the relationship between labour and management. The concept of a ‘global hot shop’ provides a new layer by which to analyse union organising drives and can pose useful when analysing how future global events, such as global warming or rising authoritarianism, could affect labour organising. Second, this article puts evidence behind the conventional wisdom that the pandemic has given rise to newfound labour activism, indicating that workers and unions should ‘strike while the pandemic is hot’ and attempt to gain new footholds in industries that were highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 | UNION ORGANISING AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Under Wager Act style industrial systems, there are two general types of organising campaigns: strategic corporate campaigns and ‘hot shop’ organising drives (Hickey et al., 2010; Kochan et al., 1993). The former refers to strategic organising drives created by labour unions, where organised labour will identify establishments where they could conduct successful organising drives (Bronfenbrenner & Juravich, 2001). Labour unions consider a number of factors when selecting establishments, such as the profitability of the firm, its relationship with customers, the nature of the labour performed at the work site, how easily the employer could replace striking workers, the level of unionisation at that employer, and others (McAlvevey, 2020). ‘Hot shop’ campaigns, in contrast to the methodic nature of strategic campaigns, emerge rapidly from a specific workplace event that leads workers to seek collective representation (Bronfenbrenner & Juravich, 1998; Fine, 2007). For example, if a worker becomes seriously injured during the course of work, it could lead workers to quickly seek collective representation to prevent future workplace injuries.

Identifying the predictors that lead workers to support a union during an organising campaign is a long-running area of academic study (Brett, 1980; Deshpande & Fiorito, 1989; Fiorito
et al., 1986; LaHuis & Mellor, 2001). There are two general themes of this research. First, research finds that the relationship between workers and unions is a critical component of an individual’s union commitment (Sverke & Kuruvilla, 1995; Youngblood et al., 1984). This stream of research can be broken into two subcategories: union instrumentality and general union beliefs. ‘Union instrumentality’ measures if an individual believes that a labour union will be able to address their problems at work, such as low pay or unsafe working conditions (Maffie, 2020; Tetruck et al., 2007). In contrast, the concept ‘general union beliefs’ examines an individual’s general views on labour unions, such as if they believe unions are too involved in politics are suffer from corruption (Bamberger et al., 1999; Deshpande & Fiorito, 1989; Getman & Goldberg, 1976). Both of these factors have been found to predict an individual’s interest in joining a labour organisation (Sverke & Kuruvilla, 1995).

Beyond an individual’s relationship with and views on organised labour, there are demographic and other workplace factors that scholars have found predict an individual’s union commitment. One the strongest predictors of union commitment is if an individual has had personal or vicarious experience with a labour union (Maffie, 2020). For these individuals, research finds that both exposure to and personal experience with a union is likely to improve their likelihood of supporting a union. Furthermore, job-specific factors, such as if an individual is a full-time employee vs. a part-time or seasonal worker shape how likely someone is to experience the benefits of unionisation (Kochan et al., 2019). Other workplace factors include the nature and extent of a company’s human resource management practices, with some studies finding that firms’ HRM practices can temper individuals’ desire for union representation (Brett, 1980; Fiorito, 2000; Roche, 2001), although the evidence here is mixed (Machin & Wood, 2005). Other demographic factors have also been found to be associated with an individual’s union commitment, such as gender, race, and education (Maleka, 2018).

3 | THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has coincided with a number of high-profile moments of labour activism around the globe (NPR, 2021). These actions have taken various shapes, such as existing union members launching notable and long-lasting strikes in multiple industries, increased labour militarism during contract negotiations, and an uptick in union organising activities (Abrams, 2021). For labour scholars, this increase in labour activism has been surprising as some of these actions have occurred in places once thought ‘unorganisable’, such as the union recognition election at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama or the wave of recent union victories at Starbucks locations across the United States (Goldberg, 2022; Sainato, 2022). Organised labour has been so active during the pandemic that one labour centre developed an online tracking tool for workers’ collective activities (Catt, 2021), finding more than 300 labour actions in 2021 alone.

This increase in labour activism has given rise to the conventional wisdom that the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked renewed interest in collective representation (Widdicome, 2022). The popular press has advanced two ways that the pandemic could have done so. The first is that the pandemic revealed the power imbalance in the workplace (Kullgren et al., 2021). According to this argument, the pandemic illuminated how little institutional protection workers have from employers, such as enabling employers to require workers to continue working during the pandemic, sometimes without adequate PPE. Yet once workers witnessed how little protection labour law provides them at work, this argument posits that they began to seek out other means
of protecting themselves, such as a labour union. Similar to the power imbalance argument, the second possible mechanism is that workers began to see their individual workplace challenges in a collective light (Widdicome, 2022). According to this argument, workers saw the effect of individual workplace challenges, such as the lack of sick leave, and how that affected their co-workers (and families). Once workers began to see their individual struggles in a collective lens, they would then turn to a collective solution—namely, a union.

Despite these theories aligning with the general increase in labour activism, there is some evidence that the aforementioned events were a one-time outlet for pent up labour actions that were delayed due to the initial wave of lockdowns that occurred in mid-2020. For example, despite the media attention to organising campaigns at Starbucks and Amazon, the number of recognition elections filed with the National Labor Relations Board in January 2022 is nearly equivalent to those in the years immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the number of workers belonging to a labour union in the United States continued its decline in 2021 (BLS, 2022). Perhaps the most intriguing absence of evidence, however, comes from workers themselves: despite the widespread belief that the pandemic led workers to seek out collective representation, scholars have yet to systematically investigate if the impact of the pandemic has affected how workers think about joining a union or participating in a labour action.

Theoretically, investigating the relationship between workers’ experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and their interest in collective representation merits attention because it represents a rare moment when a system-wide event could have altered the relationship between labour and management. Although extant theory analyses workers’ interest in joining a union at the establishment-level (e.g. Kochan et al., 1993; LaHuis & Mellor, 2001), emphasising an individual’s relationship with unions or their employer, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a larger, society-wide event that could altered the relationship between labour and management. Finding evidence that industrial system-wide events can shape workers’ interest in joining a union would suggest an important, but to date overlooked, level to understanding workers’ union preferences. Alternatively, finding that the pandemic did not affect workers’ desire to join a labour union would reject a popular, yet to date unsubstantiated storyline about the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4 | DATA AND METHODS

4.1 | Research context

I situated this study in the ride-hail industry for three reasons. First, as close interactions with others places workers at a high risk of contracting COVID-19, ride-hail drivers are highly exposed to the virus. Additionally, vehicles, as opposed to industrial work or education, is unlikely to have the necessary ventilation that could protect individuals from prolonged exposure to a person with COVID-19. Second, although some employers attempted to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on their workforces, such as instituting work from home policies or providing workers with protective equipment, ride-hail companies did not make such efforts. In fact, not only did these companies not provide PPE to drivers at the start of the pandemic, in some cases they attempted to sell workers this equipment. Accordingly, these workers’ feelings about the pandemic are unlikely to be mitigated by corporate policies. Finally, as these workers fall outside of traditional labour and employment protections, they are highly vulnerable to the pandemic as an economic shock.
4.2 | Participants

Recruiting online gig workers is challenging because these workers lack a central gathering spot (Parrott & Reich, 2020). In order to overcome this barrier, scholars typically recruit participants from worker organisations, online gathering spots (e.g. Facebook), and with the help of online influencers (Griesbach et al., 2019; Maffie, 2020; Milkman et al., 2020). Following this research strategy, I recruited 531 ride-hail drivers three ways. First, three driver organisations, two in California and one in a Northeast metropolitan area, sent a message to their members regarding the study. Second, two social media influencers, Torsten Kunert, the ‘Rideshare Professor’ and Harry Campbell, the ‘Rideshare Guy’, posted a call for participants on their social media channels. Finally, I engaged in targeted Facebook recruitment by posting a call for participants in three private driver Facebook groups. I selected these groups because they require users to present their activation information as a condition of membership. Table 1 compares these participants’ demographic information to past empirical research on ride-hail drivers.

4.3 | Study design

Following past survey research on platform workers (Maffie, 2022a, 2022b; Parrott & Reich, 2020), I administered the survey over three time periods, spacing the surveys 4 weeks.
apart. In the first wave, I collected demographic information from workers, including their gender, race, number of children at home, educational level, previous experience with unions, and views on union instrumentality. In the third wave, I collected the independent and dependent variables and participants’ views on labour unions involvement in politics. Of the 521 participants who began the study, 240 provided usable data for the entire study, a 46% retention rate.

Independent variable of interest: Support for a union in an election. Drawing on previous research on worker voice and representation (Kochan et al., 2019), I asked participants, ‘If an election were held today to decide whether rideshare drivers like you should be represented by a union, would you vote for the union or against the union?’ Nearly three out of four participants (72.9%) indicated they would support a union for ride-hail drivers.

Dependent variable of interest: Impact of Event scale. To measure the impact of an event on an individual, previous research has used the ‘Impact of Event’ scale. This scale is designed to detect the level of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms associated with an event. I selected this scale for two reasons. First, this scale has been used to measure the effects of previous mass infections, such as the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003 (Hawryluck et al., 2004) and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak (Lee et al., 2018). Second, this scale has been extensively used to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals, including their work experiences (Alexander & Grow, 2020; Chew et al., 2020; Torun & Torun, 2020). Accordingly, I chose to use this scale to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ride-hail drivers. The scale returned a 0.91 Cronbach’s alpha, suggesting good reliability. See Table 1A (Appendix A) for questions, means, and standard deviations.

Control variables. I employed several established scales to control for workers’ experience with and views on labour unions. First, I used Davy and Shipper’s (1993) union instrumentality and Deshpande and Fiorito’s (1989) ‘Big Labour Image’ scales to control for workers’ existing views on labour unions. Second, I control for past personal or vicarious experience with unions by asking if the respondent or a family member has experience working in a union. Third, I control for demographic characteristics that past research has found to correlate with individuals’ views on unions (education, race, gender, age). Additionally, research suggests that ride-hail drivers with less experience on the service are likely to overestimate their earnings, leading them to have higher work satisfaction than older gig workers (Maffie 2022a). Accordingly, I controlled for the number of years an individual has worked ride-hail. Finally, as individuals who have other loved ones in their house may be particularly affected by the COVID-19 virus, I also control for if workers have children at home. This final control variable did not meaningfully affect the estimates. Summary statistics for categorical and continuous variables can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

### TABLE 2 Distribution of continuous variables

| Variable                  | Mean | SD  |
|---------------------------|------|-----|
| Union instrumentality     | 3.28 | 0.96|
| Big Labour Image          | 3.51 | 1.5 |
| Impact of events scale    | 2.96 | 0.84|
| Years working ride-hail   | 4.14 | 1.67|
4.4 | Method

As the response variable is bound between zero and one, I modelled these data as both a logistic model and a linear probability model (Angrist & Pischke, 2008). Regression results were robust to model specification and returned qualitatively similar results. For ease of interpretation, the linear probability model is displayed in Table 3 and referenced in Section 5, whereas the logistic model is presented in Table B1 in Appendix B.

5 | RESULTS

Table 3 contains the results of regressing the Impact of Event scale on ride-hail drivers’ interest in voting for a union. There are several notable findings. First, consistent with past research on workers’ decision to support a labour union, both the union instrumentality \( p < 0.01 \) and ‘Big Labour Image’ scale \( p < 0.01 \) returned significant results with the appropriate effect on a workers’ desire to support a ride-hail union. Additionally, these results suggest that workers with greater experience in the industry are more likely support a ride-hail drivers’ union, with each year corresponding with a 2.3% increase in their likelihood of voting for a union.

| Would vote for union |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Impact of events scale | 0.139*** (0.029) |
| Union instrumentality | 0.063** (0.023) |
| Big Labour Image | 0.125*** (0.016) |
| Union experience [Yes] | 0.076 (0.047) |
| Sex [Female] | 0.110 (0.067) |
| Race [ref = White]: Asian/Asian Pacific Island | 0.230** (0.085) |
| | Black | 0.188* (0.076) |
| | Hispanic | 0.001 (0.090) |
| Age | 0.028 (0.022) |
| Education [ref = High School] | 0.013 (0.084) |
| | College | 0.055 (0.091) |
| | Graduate school | 0.017 (0.089) |
| | Some college | 0.295 (0.215) |
| Children at home [Yes] | 0.008 (0.049) |
| Years of experience | 0.029* (0.014) |
| N | 240 |
| \( R^2 \) | 0.465 |
| Adjusted \( R^2 \) | 0.424 |

Note: Some control omitted for clarity.

\*\( p < 0.05 \). \**\( p < 0.01 \). \***\( p < 0.001 \).
Furthermore, the impact of events scale returned a significant ($p < 0.001$) positive association with a worker supporting a ride-hail drivers’ union, with each point on the scale corresponding with a 13.9% increase in the probability a worker would vote for the union. Finally, both the adjusted $R^2$ (0.42) and $R^2$ (0.46) indicate that this model explains nearly half of the variance in the model. For reference, a bivariate correlation between the Impact of Event scale and the dependent variable of interest finds that the scale explains 9% of the variance in the model.

6 | LIMITATIONS

There are several important limitations to these data. First, due to the cross-sectional nature of these data, the results cannot claim a causal relationship between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and workers’ interest in supporting a labour union. Instead, these results provide initial data that there is an association between the impact of the pandemic and workers’ desire to join a labour union. Yet reading these results in the context of a general increase in labour activism and actions provides evidence that the pandemic has acted as a ‘hot shop’, increasing workers’ interest in collective voice. Future research can build on these results by instrumenting for an individual’s exposure to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as using preexisting health conditions, that may not be correlated with their interest in joining a union. Furthermore, qualitative data on organising in light of the COVID-19 pandemic could help explain what about the COVID-19 pandemic led workers to seek out collective action.

Second, participants in this study do not represent a random draw of drivers and may possess systematic biases. For example, those who seek out a worker organisation may already be interested in joining a union, explaining why over 72% of the drivers in this sample would support joining a union. Yet this merely compresses the variation in the dependent variable, suggesting that the models understate the relationship between the pandemic and interest in joining a labour union. Accordingly, future research can build on this study by using administrative data to gather a random draw of gig workers. Yet because platform companies limit access to their administrative data (Griswold, 2018), and are strongly opposed to their workers organising, it is unlikely that it will be possible to obtain these data. In light of this limitation, I relied on previously established methods of gathering data on gig workers’ interest in collective labour activity.

Third, it is unclear how employer policies that mitigate workers’ exposure to the pandemic could shape workers’ interest in joining a union. For example, employers that mobilised resources to protect their frontline workers, such as providing these workers with extended sick leave or PPE may have reduced these workers’ interest in collective representation. Future research could build on these results to examine the intersection of pandemic mitigation policies to see if they mediate the relationship between the impact of the pandemic and workers’ interest in collective representation.

7 | DISCUSSION

In this article, I use original survey data from 240 ride-hail drivers to examine the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and workers’ interest in union representation. After controlling for previously established predictors of union commitment, I found a significant positive association between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers and their interest in
joining a labour union. This finding provides the first evidence that the increase in labour activity in 2021 and 2022 were associated with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workplace. This finding has both theoretical and policy implications.

As the National Labor Relations Act confines organising to the shop-level (Kochan et al., 1993), extant research has focused on how elements of individual workplaces (Fiorito, 2000; Fiorito et al., 1986), such as workers’ belief in union’s ability to address their problems with management, as predictors of workers’ support for a union. Given the NLRA model, this focus on establishment-level factors has provided a strong foundation for scholars to make predictions about the outcome of organising elections (Getman & Goldberg, 1976). Yet the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have created a global shock to the employer-employee relationship, where the power imbalance between labour and management became clear as employers placed their interests ahead of workers’. This sudden moment of tension in the employment relationship appears to have increased workers’ interest in collective representation as a way to protect themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theoretically, this finding provides evidence for a global hot shop phenomenon, where a sudden shock to an industrial system gives rise to a flurry of organising activity. Such a shock transcends individual workplaces and has intriguing implications for the labour movement as a whole. For example, if large parts of society collectively experienced a realignment in their working experiences, it raises the prospect that these events may have longer lasting effects than mere individual ‘hot shop’ events. Accordingly, the durability of this shock, and how employers may have mitigated it, will be fruitful future research directions.

This finding also pushes scholars to consider larger macro-political events when thinking about the nature of labour organising. In the coming years, several macro-political events, such as rising authoritarianism and global warming, could act as shocks to the employment relationship, revealing the power imbalance between labour and management and giving rise to future ‘global hot shops’. The results of this study suggest that such events could lead workers to seek out collective labour organisations as a method of protecting themselves against the imbalance of power in the employment relationship. Other events where employers and employees have a zero-sum shock, such as recessions or terrorist attacks, could also give rise to similar hot shop events on a more localised scale. Regardless of the exact triggers, however, this article illustrates that industrial relations scholars must look beyond the immediate workplace for larger, macro-political forces that may shape the balance of power in the workplace because these forces can play a role in workers’ desire to join a labour union.

In the immediate future, however, this article indicates that labour organisations should strategically ‘strike while the pandemic is hot’—that is, while workers are still facing the daily threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these workers, such as those in the frontline service industry, have historically eluded organised labour in the United States. Yet the global hot shop may provide a momentary opening for organised labour to begin union campaigns in these workplaces, such as the national Starbucks organising drive in the United States and develop a foothold in these industries. At the same time, the lengthy delays built into the Wager Act model of union representation could pose a challenge for these drives.

8 | CONCLUSION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a global resurgence of labour activity. Anecdotal evidence suggests that workers’ newfound interest in collective representation and
power emerged when the pandemic laid bare the power imbalance in the workplace. This article provides the first empirical evidence that greater exposure to the pandemic may have influenced workers’ desire to form or join a union. In doing so, this article supports the narrative that the pandemic has given rise to a new wave of labour activism and provides a novel concept to the labour organising literature—the global hot shop phenomenon.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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**APPENDIX A: IMPACT OF EVENT SCALE**

**TABLE A1** Impact of event scale descriptive statistics

| Please evaluate the following questions for how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your work: | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|
| I thought about how the pandemic is affecting my work even when I did not mean to. | 3.91 | 1.22 |
| I avoided letting myself get upset when I thought about it or was reminded of it. | 3.69 | 1.10 |
| I tried to remove it from memory. | 2.93 | 1.16 |
| I had trouble falling asleep or staying asleep because of pictures or thoughts about it that came into my mind. | 2.62 | 1.33 |
| I had waves of strong feelings about it. | 3.09 | 1.26 |
| I stayed away from reminders of it. | 2.11 | 1.23 |
| I felt as if it had not happened or wasn’t real. | 3.95 | 0.43 |
| Pictures about it popped into my mind. | 2.65 | 1.37 |
| Other things kept making me think about it. | 3.15 | 1.41 |
| I was aware I still had a lot of feelings about it, but I did not deal with them. | 2.57 | 1.27 |
| I tried not to think about it. | 3.01 | 1.26 |
| Any reminder brought back feelings about it. | 2.87 | 1.25 |
| My feelings about it were kind of numb. | 2.78 | 1.23 |

Note: The first five items were converted from a seven to a 5-point scale to match the other items in the scale.
APPENDIX B: LOGIT MODEL

TABLE B1 Logit model regressing impact of COVID-19 on workers interest in joining a union

|                                | Would vote for union |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| Impact of events scale         | 1.41*** (0.33)       |
| Union instrumentality          | 0.52* (0.24)         |
| Big Labour Image               | −1.25*** (0.22)      |
| Union experience [Yes]         | −0.89* (0.47)        |
| Sex [Female]                   | −1.12* (0.60)        |
| Race [ref = White]: Asian/Asian Pacific Island | 17.80 (1157.21) |
| Black                          | 2.64 (1.05)          |
| Hispanic                       | −0.09 (0.08)         |
| Age                            | −0.23 (0.20)         |
| Education [ref = High School]  |                      |
| College                        | −0.22 (0.97)         |
| Graduate school                | −0.80 (1.04)         |
| Some college                   | −0.66 (1.01)         |
| Some high school               | −2.61 (2.94)         |
| Children at home [Yes]         | 0.04 (0.50)          |
| Years of experience            | 0.32* (0.15)         |

Note: *, **, *** refer to $p < 0.05, 0.01, and 0.001$, respectively. Some control omitted for clarity.