Coping with precarity during COVID-19: A study of platform work in Poland

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**Abstract:** This article explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the work and life experiences of platform workers’ and how workers have responded to the outbreak in Poland. Platform workers have been exposed to substantial fluctuations of demand during the pandemic, magnifying the distortions existing in an unregulated asymmetrical employment relationship diverging from the standard employment relationship. Findings illustrate how workers have attempted to reduce the disruptions underpinning the existence of this unregulated asymmetrical relationship by adopting different strategies, which resemble Hirschman’s typology of loyalty, voice and exit. We explain the choice of strategies by highlighting workers’ different access to resources and institutional capabilities, as well as by variation in their orientations.

**Keywords:** precarity, COVID-19, platform work, standard employment relationship, coping strategies, food delivery, online platforms

1. **Introduction**

Marking the first health, economic and social upheaval faced by platform workers, COVID-19 reveals the precarious consequences of an intermediary business model based on platform work. As such, COVID-19 spotlights the inner contradictions of ‘platform work’, a form of work where the worker bears the risk within a context where social welfare no longer offsets the asymmetries typical of an unequal employment relationship (Crouch 2019). In this article we focus on COVID-19, looking at the challenges it poses to platform workers in a country like Poland with an institutionally fragmented context in which platforms thrive. In so doing, we illustrate what the word ‘precarity’ means in real life, shedding light on the daily work and life experiences of platform workers confronted with the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Two research questions underpin our work. Firstly, we ask how the outbreak of COVID-19 has affected the work and life experiences of platform workers. Secondly, we pose the question of how workers have responded to the outbreak; what strategies have they put in place and why? The article contributes to debates on the absence of employment continuity, the lack of autonomy, social security and control as well as low incomes as the features shaping the precarious conditions of platform workers (Wood et al. 2019; De Stefano 2016; Berg 2016). It presents evidence of the challenges these conditions – or better the absence of decent and fair working conditions – pose for the work and life of platform workers. We illustrate how the enduring existence of unregulated asymmetries in the employment relationship can affect workers’ daily experience. These asymmetries reflect the structural inequality typical of platform-based employment and the effects it produces on workers when confronted with a risk situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. We also examine how platform workers frame their responses and strategies in their attempts to re-establish the social balance surrounding the traditional employment relationship.

The findings are based on an analysis of 30 narrative interviews with platform workers – food delivery workers, translators, and IT freelancers – carried out between March and December 2020. We use an abductive analytical strategy (Kelle 2005) to identify the coping strategies or responses, which emerge from the heterogeneous sample of platforms selected. We depart from Hirschman’s (1970) typology of loyalty, voice and exit and identify distinctive strategies which reflect the diverse resources and capabilities accessible to workers, as well as their preferences underpinned by symbolic repertoires and experiences. Especially we contextualise these responses within the various ways platforms have reacted to the consecutive lockdowns since March 2020. For example, while some platforms practically ceased to operate (e.g. cleaning or care platforms) due to the pandemic-related absence of market demand, others
experienced a large slump intertwined with an influx of new workers (i.e. platforms offering online services) or a huge surge in demand (i.e. food delivery).

The article starts by presenting the theoretical background used as a framework for analysing the consequences of platform work in contrast to a standard employment relationship. After detailing our methodology and, we present the institutional framework governing platform work in Poland. Our subsequent findings shed light on how platforms were impacted by the economic fallout of COVID-19, looking at the various strategies (remaining loyal, voicing objections or exiting the platform) helping workers to deal with the distortions caused by the lack of a standard employment relationship. The paper ends with a discussion section and conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

The resources and institutional capabilities available to platform workers in the social context of their work define the ways in which they seek to overcome structural asymmetries and rebalance their social relationship vis-à-vis labour platforms. Thus, we use critical sociology (Wright 2000) in order to analyse the socially unequal employment relationship, i.e. that between an ‘employee’ (labour) and an ‘employer’ (capital) within labour platforms. Several sociological studies (Crouch 2019; Doellgast et al. 2018) have documented how structural asymmetries were cushioned by the emergence of standard employment relationships (SER). Despite early criticism from sociologists regarding SER during Fordism (Lorey 2015), considering the recent focus on neoliberalism and self-governed entrepreneurship, the importance of this relationship has been reconsidered within the same discipline.

As Crouch (2019) pointed out, SER-related rights can be considered under several headings. These include restrictions on employers’ rights to dismiss employees; union representation and collective bargaining; protected income levels; protection against
unemployment, sickness and other factors. Together they reduce employees’ dependence on the employer. Similarly, in their extensive comparative analysis, Doellgast, Lille and Pulignano (2018, 12) illustrated how inclusive social institutions can contribute to reducing precariousness, fostering and supporting unions by coordinating employer and union strategies, thereby promoting worker solidarity.

No similar rights and protections are guaranteed on labour platforms. Platform work is *in primis* not socially protected work, i.e. it is work within which the platforms shift risks to workers by bypassing labour law and legal responsibilities for its ‘collaborators’ or ‘contractors’ (de Stefano and Aloisi 2018). The ability to bypass the SER and its related regulation of wages, working time and employment conditions as well as firing and hiring primarily stems from platforms’ claim to be labour intermediaries, i.e. providing the infrastructure necessary to connect (self-employed) workers to clients. This allows platforms to handle economic risks in a manner different to the SER context – regardless of the actual artificiality of an intermediary status in many cases (e.g. with some ride hailing and food delivery platforms exercising strong managerial supervision, enforcing timetables, and fixing prices). We present evidence of the consequences this has for workers at a particular moment in time, namely the pandemic. Two features of platform work make workers particularly vulnerable in this context.

Firstly, in a typical SER context, employers initially absorb shocks and only afterwards translate them into decisions to dismiss workers, renegotiate wages (in the case of a slump in demand), increase work intensity or seek additional staff (in the case of a surge in demand), thereby creating a ‘boundary’ between the worker and the market. Conversely, platforms limit their exposure to fluctuations in demand by simply shifting the onus to workers (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2017), as witnessed by the fact that platform workers are left with less or no income when there is a drop in demand. Within a typical SER distribution of economic risks, employers
are forced to pay for workers’ idle time, incentivizing them to use workers’ time productively (Prassl and Risak 2015). While SER regulations usually require employers to provide employees with means of production, platform workers are expected to utilize their private resources (equipment, vehicles) for their work (Mika 2020).

Secondly, by structuring their operations as intermediaries, platforms can limit hiring and firing costs, as they are able to significantly expand their workforce by creating a ‘reserve army of labour’ for which they do not necessarily need to find sufficient demand (Graham and Anwar 2019). It may be generally argued that, because market demand is a precondition for the existence of platform work, platforms tend to accept relatively more workers and have relatively low barriers of recruitment, thereby pushing labour costs down and attracting new clients. This aspect is important in the context of the unemployment surge caused by COVID-19, with platforms luring the unemployed and underemployed with the promise of extra income. Yet as the influx of new platform workers is not necessarily reflected in higher customer demand, work shortages are likely. Indeed, this influx may even threaten existing platform workers by subjecting them to increased competition and lower rates, as platforms retain a lot of flexibility regarding structuring workers’ wages.

Within a context where platforms are able to handle risk in other ways, examining the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on platform workers poses the question of understanding not only how this risk impacts platform workers’ work and life experiences but also how (if at all) these workers have responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic itself. To do that, we intend to utilize Hirschman’s typology as a starting point. According to him, members of organization faced with problems can stay and support the organization (loyalty), can express individually their dissatisfaction with its functioning or collectively attempt to reform its rules by organising and communicating the claims in public (voice), or, finally, follow the market logic: quit to find a different organization (exit) (Dowding 2015, 262). Literature suggests that
uncertainty experienced at work is likely to promote exit (Sverke and Hellgren 2001). Workers’ capabilities to voice out their objections and exert pressure depend on power structures such as unions and resources such as experience within the organization (Allen and Tüselmann 2009). Moreover, the voice is more likely if the exit options are feasible. Loyalty in case of job uncertainty tends to result either from passivity and/or from factors binding worker to the organization and making other options too costly or difficult (Hirschman 1970).

The Hirschman’s typology has been criticised for its assumption that exit and voice are ‘alternatives, whereas in fact they could be used in unison’ (Dowding 2015, 260). Being loyal to organisation can both lead to the critique of it in case of its crisis and make people wait and see until the situation improves (Saunders 1992). The range of actions workers have is determined by context, including their resources, institutional capabilities, situation on the labour market, and preferences (Naus et al. 2007; Davidson and Meyers 2014). This opens the space for empirical investigation of specific strategies in the case of platform workers facing the consequences of pandemic crisis.

Existing research on the consequences of COVID-19 is still patchy. Looking at Polish Glovo couriers, Polkowska (2020) argued that workers did not feel negatively affected by the pandemic. At least during the initial period, demand surged, allowing them to enjoy relatively good wages and increased recognition. Conversely, other studies noted that precarity increased in the sense that workers were left alone with the consequences of the lack of sick pay and other sources of income when confronted with quarantine restrictions and the decline in demand for services caused by COVID-19 (Herrera et al. 2020; Fairwork 2020; Pulignano et al., 2021). Although many workers responded by retreating to individualistic strategies aimed at maintaining their income within platforms (Polkowska 2020), the pandemic also gave some of them “the impetus to raise their voices against underlying structural injustices” (Trappmann et al. 2020), leading to protest actions in many countries, though notably not in Poland. In the
subsequent parts of the article, we examine Polish platform workers’ responses to the pandemic in detail and look for specific conditions under which exit, voice and loyalty tend to occur. It is argued, in line with Scott’s (1985) thesis on ‘the weapons of the weak’, that in the context of absence of organised trade unionism in Poland, the notion of ‘voice’ should also include the low profile, daily forms of micro-resistance, usually combined with other forms of responses distinguished by Hirschman, namely exit and loyalty.

3. Research design and methodology

The data collection in the form of 30 narrative interviews with food delivery workers (n=17), platform translators (n=9) and IT freelancers (n=4) took place between March and December 2020. Among our respondents, 16 were male and 14 were female, and an average age was 28 years. Five platforms were selected: three food delivery platforms (Glovo; Takeaway – operating under the Pyszne.pl brand; and Stava) and two generalist online platforms (Upwork and Useme). Although our aim was to guarantee theoretical rather than statistical representativeness, we selected the platforms on the basis of criteria broadly covering Poland’s whole platform population: the character of the provided services (i.e. platforms offering online and offline services); the scale of operations (i.e. within online and offline subsamples, at least one international and one regional platform); and in the case of offline services (food delivery), the payment method (i.e. one platform with hourly rate and one with per-piece rate). The selection of workers within the platforms was purposive based upon numerous criteria, including age, gender, profession and the level of dependency on platform work. The participants were recruited via direct contact on platforms and social media groups and offered 25 EUR to encourage participation and offset lost time. An overview of the basic information on the interviewees is presented below, along with some empirical findings discussed in greater detail in the findings section.
## Appendix 1. Overview of workers

| Worker   | Age | Gender | Platform (subsector) | Legal ramification | Dependence on platform | Other sources of income/support | Narrated impact of COVID-19 | Strategy (reconstructed) |
|----------|-----|--------|----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Stefan   | 66  | M      | Uuseme (translator)  | Civil law contract for specific task | Around 50%             | Welfare (pension)               | Increased competition         | Loyalty                 |
| Julia    | 34  | F      | Uuseme (translator)  | Sole proprietorship | Around 50%             | Rent, partner                   | Losing clients, increased competition | Loyalty                 |
| Polina   | 22  | F      | Uuseme (translator)  | Civil law contract for specific task | Almost 100%            | Family                          | Started working around COVID-19, faces huge competition | Loyalty                 |
| Kaja     | 26  | F      | Uuseme (translator)  | Civil law contract for specific task | 100%                   | Savings                         | Losing clients, increased competition | Hybrid strategy         |
| Teresa   | 31  | F      | Upwork & Useme (translator) | Informal (Upwork) Civil law contracts (Useme) | Almost 100% | Artistic scholarship | Losing clients, increased competition | Loyalty                 |
| Matylda  | 38  | F      | Upwork (translator)  | Sole proprietorship | 100%                   | None                            | Losing clients, increased competition | Hybrid strategy         |
| Anita    | 30  | F      | Upwork (translator)  | Informal (formally unemployed) | 100%                   | Welfare (access to healthcare insurance while being unemployed) | Losing clients, increased competition | Loyalty                 |
| Barbara  | 36  | F      | Upwork (translator)  | Sole proprietorship | 100%                   | Savings                         | Losing all clients, increased competition | Loyalty                 |
| Hanna    | 51  | F      | Upwork (translator)  | Sole proprietorship | Almost 100%            | None                            | Losing clients                  | Loyalty                 |
| Krzysztof| 26  | M      | Upwork (IT)          | Sole proprietorship | Around 50%             | Savings                         | Losing clients                  | Loyalty                 |
| Adam     | 20  | M      | Uuseme (IT)          | Civil law contract for specific task | Around 50%             | Permanent regular job, savings | No impact                      | Loyalty                 |
| Nina     | 27  | F      | Uuseme (IT & graphic designer) | Civil law contract for specific task | 100%                   | None                            | Losing clients, increased competition | Loyalty                 |
| Filip    | 21  | M      | Uuseme (IT)          | Civil law contract for specific task | 100%                   | Savings                         | Lost source of income due to COVID-19, found employment on platform | Exit                    |
| Tomasz   | 29  | M      | Glovo (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100%                   | None                            | Lost job right before COVID-19, found employment on Glovo | Exit                    |
| Roman    | 21  | M      | Glovo (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100%                   | Some savings                    | Lost job during COVID-19, found employment on platform | Loyalty                 |
| Ola      | 24  | F      | Glovo (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100%                   | Some savings                    | Lost job during COVID-19, found employment on platform | Loyalty                 |
| Michal   | 30  | M      | Glovo (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100%                   | Family                          | Lost job right before COVID-19, found employment on platform | Exit                    |
| Rafal    | 36  | M      | Glovo (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100%                   | Savings                         | Lost demand on Uber because of COVID-19; found employment on Glovo | Hybrid strategy         |
| Ewelina  | 23  | F      | Stava (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | Main source of income     | Welfare (family pension)        | Decreased working hours and lower rates on platform | Hybrid strategy         |
| Paulina  | 23  | F      | Stava (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | Main source of income     | Partner                         | Decreased working hours and lower rates on platform | Loyalty                 |
| Marcin   | 24  | M      | Stava (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | Main source of income     | University scholarship          | Decreased working hours and lower rates on platform | Loyalty                 |
| Name  | Age | Gender | Platform | Contract Type | Income Source | Loyalty | COVID-19 Impact | Working Conditions |
|-------|-----|--------|----------|---------------|---------------|---------|----------------|-------------------|
| Piotr | 21  | M      | Stava    | Civil law contract for mandate | Main source of income; governmental help | Loyalty | Lost main job during COVID-19 and went back to working full time on platform; decreased working hours due to more competition. |
| Wiktoria | 23 | F    | Stava    | Civil law contract for mandate | Main source of income | Loyalty | Started working during COVID-19 |
| Szymon | 23  | M    | Stava    | Civil law contract for mandate | Main source of income | Loyalty | Lost job during COVID-19, found employment on platform |
| Laura | 21  | F    | Pyszne.pl/Takeaway (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100% | Loyalty | Started working during COVID-19 |
| Konrad | 19  | M    | Pyszne.pl/Takeaway (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100% | Loyalty | Increased competition, lack of control over working hours |
| Artur | 19  | M    | Pyszne.pl/Takeaway (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100% | Hybrid strategy | Lost job during COVID-19 and found employment on platform; more competition & work intensification |
| Mateusz | 20 | M    | Pyszne.pl/Takeaway (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100% | Exit | Lost job during COVID-19 and returned to platform work where he had worked before; increased competition & work intensification |
| Albert | 21  | M    | Pyszne.pl/Takeaway (food delivery) | Civil law contract for mandate | 100% | Loyalty | Started working during COVID-19 |
| Kuba | 47  | M    | Various food delivery platforms | Sole proprietorship | Around 50% | Hybrid strategy | Work intensification |

Source: own elaboration
During the interviews lasting between 1h30m and 4h40m, the interviewees were asked to describe their work and life experiences before and during COVID-19. The narratives were complemented by detailed questions about the COVID-19 situation. We also conducted seven expert interviews with academics, trade unionists and officials to understand the political, social, and legal ramifications of platform work in Poland. All interviews were analysed following an abductive approach, moving back and forth between theory and data analysis.

Only one of our respondents claimed to have been infected by COVID-19, a fact partially explainable by the chronology of our research and the infection rate in Poland. The interviews were predominantly conducted before the second wave hit Poland (around October 2020) – in a period with relatively low infection rates.

4. Institutional framework of platform work in Poland

The institutional framework of platform work in Poland is highly fragmented, with platforms exploiting the existing ‘grey zones’ of employment regulation (Owczarek 2018). Various attempts to adopt policies aimed at improving the working conditions of all non-standard workers, including platform workers, have been made. Nevertheless, platform workers are outside the protection afforded to the SER by the labour code, including a monthly minimum wage, working time regulation (breaks during and between shifts, overtime premiums, and paid holidays), and protection against dismissal (including statutory periods of notice). Platforms are – unlike regular employers – not obliged to provide their workers with the tools necessary to perform work. Though all self-employed (including platform workers) have the right to organize and join trade unions, unions are not-existent in the platform economy and unionization attempts have been limited.
The online platform workers we interviewed were freelancers. Some were official businesses (sole proprietorships) subject to all social security contributions and healthcare insurance, as well as covered by hourly minimum rate regulations. Where workers do not run their own business, they settle payments by concluding civil law contracts for a specific task with a platform (which does not grant them any rights – they are not protected by minimum wage regulation, are not covered by social security nor compulsory healthcare insurance) or are simply within the grey zone, not reporting their income.

The regulation of offline platform work (including food delivery) is slightly different, and workers could be defined as dependent self-employed. They conclude civil law contracts reminiscent of UK zero-hour contracts with platforms or intermediaries. The intermediary system in Poland is a side effect of the fact that most platforms in Poland operate solely on a business-to-business (B2B). Because the sole proprietorship model is relatively expensive in Poland, most couriers conclude civil law contracts with intermediaries which then sign contracts with the platforms themselves (Polkowska 2020). Thus, there is no direct legal relationship between the platform and the worker, meaning that any reclassification (moving from a non-standard to a standard contract via legal action) would only involve the intermediary and not the platform, highlighting workers’ ambiguous status. The contracts are covered by healthcare insurance, and partially by social security – without sick leave. Workers are also in theory covered by the hourly minimum rate, though some platforms circumvent this by claiming that they pay their subcontractors only for work performed and not for idle waiting time, even though workers are expected to be available in specific timeslots.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, platform workers were largely outside the scope of the support measures. Sole proprietors (6 of the 30 workers in our sample) were eligible for limited support. Platform workers on civil law contracts were not eligible to file for assistance designed for civil law contractors because their wages were calculated per task and not per hour.
Hence, the legal status of platform workers is blurred. Platform workers can be *grosso modo* defined as self-employed, yet the regulatory framework grants them few rights and protections, which are not necessarily observed in practice. Despite workers having unionization rights, no unionizing takes place. This puts workers in a situation where their individual and collective adaptations may vastly influence their position vis-à-vis platforms, as well as their access to institutional resources and welfare.

5. **The impact of COVID-19 on platform work**

Due to uncertainty, demand fluctuated greatly during the COVID-19 lockdowns, impacting job stability, the predictability of working hours, and incomes. At the same time, there was a substantial increase in the number of workers willing to work for platforms.

Food delivery platforms initially enjoyed a surge in demand when the lockdown was announced in mid-March 2020, with many people working remotely and restaurants physically closed for eat-in clients. Workers reported a high work intensity in the early weeks of the lockdown. After the initial peak, work intensity stabilized as many clients reverted to eating-in, and food delivery platforms recruited intensively to handle the higher demand. This was particularly easy during the lockdown, with thousands of dismissed workers looking for work. Kuba, an experienced food delivery courier and a moderator on a social media group of couriers, had this to report.

“In the first two months of COVID it [social media group] grew by 1000 new members. People were asking about this opportunity to earn some money, because it is easy and easily available work. But not when it is full of all this... there’s no buffer, right? They [platforms] can employ those people up to the roof” (Kuba, food delivery courier)
Kuba uses the expression “up to the roof” to refer to platforms’ ability to significantly expand the workforce due to the low costs associated with hiring. 9 out of the 17 food delivery workers interviewed had lost their jobs either during or around the lockdown (mid-March) and food delivery was the only employment option open to them, since no other companies were hiring. When lockdown restrictions were eased and demand stopped surging, workers were left with fewer opportunities to work and earn money and food delivery workers had to switch from high-intensity to low-intensity work due to stable demand coupled with a larger “supply” of workers. The latter aspect incentivized food delivery platforms to change their pay structure. Referring to the difficult economic situation and increased competition among food delivery companies during COVID-19, they reduced their rates, forcing workers to work more to maintain their pre-COVID-19 incomes. Overall, work intensity on food delivery platforms remained high.

Developments on online platforms for translators and IT workers differed. Both reported a slump in demand in mid-March, and increased competition between freelancers after the lockdown. Demand dropped because companies cut spending *inter alia* on outsourced services, thus cutting out external contractors, as explained by Hanna, an experienced translator on Upwork stressing that “*free agents* [in English - authors] *are the first to lose contracts*”.

At the same time, more workers joined the labour platforms to seek work after losing their jobs. Demand for IT workers quickly recovered, with companies requiring their services to gain greater online visibility in the lockdown economy. The translation sector was impacted longer, with workers indirectly affected by the difficult situation in its “twin” subsector – language teaching. Many language schools cancelled courses or were forced to close, meaning that language teachers started looking for translation work. Platforms were in fact flooded with new freelancers. One of our respondents reported that the average number of bids on Useme per translation task had been a few to a dozen before March 2020, but had shot up to over 100
after the COVID-19 outbreak. This heightened competition lowered workers’ bargaining power, with clients pressuring them to cut their rates. A lot more effort was needed to gain clients, since new workers accepted fees well below those before COVID-19. This is well documented by Polina, who started working intensively on a platform during the lockdown and accepted rates significantly below market rates:

“It was very difficult to estimate the price for this task [...] So I said 300 PLN but there was work for [at least] 500 PLN. [...] I didn’t renegotiate, because the competition is too intense” (Polina, Useme translator)

Polina was not the only one to start looking for a job during COVID-19. Other freelancers see people like Polina as dragging prices down on the market, as highlighted by Stefan, an experienced translator:

“Today a woman wrote that she wants to have translated into English a contract of 120,000 chars for a budget of 600 PLN. My price is 12 PLN per 1000 chars, so I would take 1400 PLN. I’m curious whether she would find a sucker to translate it for her. Probably yes, because right now there’s a flood of graduates of various studies: German, English, Polish studies, other languages as well”. (Stefan, Useme translator)

The fluctuating demand increased income insecurity. Whereas within a standard employment relationship scheme changes in wages must be communicated, negotiated and adopted over a relatively long period of time, platforms can easily adapt payment structures to reflect volatile market situations (changes in demand or in labour supply) because they operate as intermediaries between clients and self-employed workers. Though an industry may be
thriving (like food delivery during lockdown), rates may go down due to a higher supply of labour combined with little to no entry barriers to the sector and no hiring costs. For instance, in some Polish cities Glovo adapted the pay structure four times during the two months of lockdown, as described by Andrzej:

“When I started, there was a minimum rate per hour: if for example nothing happened for an hour, I still got the minimum basic rate [...] of 20 PLN. [...] A few weeks later, it went down to 19 PLN, and now [...] they’ve given up this rate and introduced a multiplier. The effect was that at the end it came out to be the same, but this multiplier is now 1.1, there is also less and less of [...] what I can ride for an hour”. (Andrzej, Glovo courier)

Substantial changes of rates were also reported by online workers, with companies using the COVID-19 crisis as an argument to renegotiate fees:

“A week before the lockdown some of my clients informed me that they were cutting their rates by 20% [...] I wanted to terminate those contracts, but I said ok. I am still doing what I am doing, the scope of the agreements has not changed, the number of hours has not changed but [...] I do not want to mouth off”. (Julia, Useme translator)

Secondly, workers were more exposed to changes in work intensity and working time. Due to lack of regulations on working time, breaks, overtime, and holiday, workers remain largely without control over their working time, bouncing between underworking when demand is low to overworking when demand surges. This manifested itself particularly during lockdown and the subsequent easing of lockdown restrictions:
“It’s been less busy because of the pandemic and summer; all couriers have been getting fewer shifts; and everybody wants to make some money”. (Marcin, Stava courier)

“In early April, demand for translations plummeted and remained very low for three weeks – there was no work at all. It’s not only me who feels this way, many other translators think the same. […] Before the pandemic, I tried not to work on weekends, but now it has changed because everyone is afraid that I might lose clients. So now I work on weekends”. (Barbara, Upwork translator)

Thirdly, since workers were more exposed to underworking, they often lost income without being directly told about it, staying with a platform until eventually realizing they could not live off it. Within our sample, 11 out of 30 workers struggled to earn sufficient income to meet their basic needs. These workers were still present on platforms, looking for tasks and thus creating competition and lowering fees.

Summing up, COVID-19 exposed platform workers to substantial changes in demand, threatening the stability of employment conditions in terms of pay, working time, and work intensity. In extreme cases, workers found themselves in a situation of underemployment. How did platform workers respond to the unsheltered conditions they experienced in the context of different resources they possessed and/or were able to access?

6. Findings
In the wake of the economic shock created by the COVID-19 pandemic and reflecting Hirschman’s (1970) classic typology, three types of workers’ responses emerged: loyalty,
hybrid strategies combining voice and loyalty, and exit. While some workers remained loyal to platforms, not challenging the perils and disadvantages they created, others framed platform work as a ‘problem’, voicing their complaints (see also: Mrozowicki and Trappmann 2020) to challenge platform work by either individual or collective action (Allen 2014). Still others exited a particular platform or platform work altogether as a result of the instability of employment conditions, with the goal of securing more secure work. Despite the innate differences in these three responses, workers clearly attempted to re-balance their – strongly unbalanced and unregulated – employment relationships in different ways, primarily by combining weak forms of voice and loyalty, with other combinations being less common.

### 6.1 Loyalty

‘Loyalty’ covers a range of actions revolving around adapting to platform work, without either individually or collectively challenging its non-standard aspect. Workers loyal to platform work accept the disadvantages and instability involved resulting from the lack of the SER. To cope, they use private economic resources (e.g. savings, help from family), institutional measures available to them (e.g. benefits, welfare), as well as repertoires framed in the light of resources they may possess (e.g. cultural references to freelancing as self-fulfilment; to being a young worker on the bottom rung of the career ladder still needing a family safety net). The respondents loyal to platforms tend to accept a high level of uncertainty and related costs also because they had little trust in a platform being able to offer ‘regulated work’, as already explained by Kuba’s statement that platforms ‘have no buffer’. Loyal workers are the largest and most diverse group among our respondents and can be grouped into different categories.

First, we observe a subgroup of online freelancers that make a living throughout the COVID-19-related disturbance by mobilizing economic capital: private resources such as savings (Barbara and Krzysztof), income from additional non-platform work (Marcin) or help
from the family (Julia), supported by “self-entrepreneurial” identity. Barbara provides a good example of this mix. A successful translator on online platforms, she was fully dependent on her platform income and was able to accumulate substantial savings. When the lockdown hit in mid-March, almost all her clients left, and her income dropped to almost zero. This impacted her private life, with her partner leaving her after she withdrew from long-term financial commitments mutually agreed before the pandemic. Barbara utilized her savings and substantially lowered her rates, accepting practically every job, and working non-stop to bounce back to a sustainable level of income. In the past, she had only limited experience with more stable working conditions, at that time highly precarious, which led her to pursue a freelancer career. Although successful, Barbara balances the lack of a regulated employment relationship on a platform with an acceptance towards overworking, exploitative client behaviour, and work interfering in private life. At no point did she consider that she was unfairly exposed to economic risks or that she should have rights vis-à-vis the platform.

The loyalty of this ‘entrepreneurial subtype’ is underpinned by self-entrepreneurial identity, where the exposure to instability resulting from being outside the protective regulation is reconstructed as personal pressure, and COVID-19 crisis is conceptualized as a business difficulty. Barbara contextualized the upheaval caused by COVID-19 as a personal problem that required further personal concessions; similarly, Julia, a Useme translator, who stressed that she wants “to keep the benchmark high and not to make excuses for lower revenue by saying it’s the epidemic”.

Secondly, within the loyal category, we see a group of both online and offline workers who do not have substantial economic capital and who primarily rely on a reference to independent career and previous precarious work experiences, which enables them to normalize the high volatility of work (‘normalized precarity’ subtype). Loyalty to platform work is grounded in difficult employment and life trajectories, with the uncertainty associated
with pandemic being nothing new to them. Unstable working conditions, a labour market not offering anything other than ‘doing gigs’, are at the core of their work histories, as explained by Hanna.

“Uncertainty related to work has always accompanied me. I live in this state of epidemic all the time ((laughter)). I cannot predict whether there will be an order from a client or not. If someone wants to terminate a contract with me, they just write <<thanks, goodbye>>. It’s quite ironic that pandemic has not impacted the way I work and my whole reality in general”. (Hanna, Upwork translator)

This group consists of both online freelancers (Hanna, Teresa, Nina) and food delivery workers (Roman, Ola) who are however strongly committed to working in a highly volatile horeca sector. In the context of limited economic resources, such workers tend to follow a minimalistic lifestyle, allowing to substantially reduce costs of living.

Thirdly, among loyal workers we observe respondents who are at least partially reliant on institutional resources, i.e. fragmented welfare state, to support themselves at work (‘welfare reliant’ subtype). Such workers are aware of precarious work situation, not necessarily related to COVID-19, and resort to institutional help. This is the case of Stefan, who supports himself with pension; Anita, an Upwork translator, who underreported her income to remain registered as the unemployed while working on Upwork, giving her access to healthcare insurance she otherwise would have found difficult to finance; and Polina, a Useme translator and single mother, who supplemented her unstable platform income by a university scholarship and child benefit. Such workers benefit from the blurred boundaries of the institutional framework to cope with the negative consequences of an unregulated employment relationship.
Finally, within a group of loyal workers we find food delivery couriers at the beginning of their career (‘transitional’ subtype), often combining work with education and support from parents (Paulina, Marcin, Piotr, Wiktoria, Szymon, Laura, Albert). This is well illustrated by Piotr, a young worker still living with his parents, who worked part-time in food delivery before COVID-19. His main job was suspended during the lockdown and food delivery became main source of income for him. However, Piotr had to resort to the family safety net to deal with wage uncertainty:

“When I shifted to deliveries [...] I started to notice the cons: it's really hard to make a living with delivery job as only source of income. I have the advantage of living with my parents, so I didn't have to worry about having the electricity cut off or whatever”.

(Piotr, Stava food delivery)

For such workers, food delivery is often “the only job available” (Albert), “a student, odd job” (Marcin), or “just a temporary solution” (Laura). Such situation enables them to rationalize uncertainty and resort to external help, particularly from family.

6.2 Hybrid strategies: voice and loyalty combined

Some workers problematize platform work by indicating the dangers associated with it and by shedding light on how they challenge its non-standard aspects. Under the ‘voice’ type of responses we classify workers’ strategies that involve framing problems at work and attempting to re-balance the lack of SER by individual or collective action focusing on the disadvantages of platform work. This is an extension of Hirschman’s original category which referred to ‘any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, all objectionable states of affairs’ (Hirschman 1970, 30).
The workers undertaking this type of response seem to belong to two categories. First, we see workers pursuing strategies reliant on collective experiences or cooperation with other workers, undertaken by food delivery couriers with higher social capital and know-how within organization (Kuba, Rafał, Ewelina). The common feature of these workers is that they seem to be more committed (higher seniority; insider knowledge) to working within the platform economy in comparison to loyal couriers. This is in line with arguments that stronger links with organisation increase the tendency to voice dissatisfaction (Dowding 2015). Unlike in other countries (Trappmann et al. 2020), a classic ‘voice’ strategy in the form of collective protests and mobilizations was rarely observed in Poland. Instead, workers rebalance asymmetry in relations with platforms, drawing from collective experiences and know-how by ‘innovative’ adaptations; a similar ‘strategic mix’ as the one observed by Karolak (2016) in the case of self-employed return migrants. In the absence of collective organisations in the industry, informal means can be conceptualised as the ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985). The combination of voice and loyalty, not surprisingly, indicates the problems of platform work ideology “to live up to the implicit promises it necessarily makes”, just as in the case of other instances of ‘weak’ forms of micro-resistance analysed by Scott (1985, 338).

Kuba, an experienced courier, was active in mobilizing workers both before and during COVID-19, administering a social media group of platform food delivery workers. Highly critical of working conditions on platforms, Kuba has attempted several times to collectively change the context of work on platforms. First, he unsuccessfully tried to set up his own local delivery business, with a view to distributing earnings more equitably among the workers. Sometime later, Kuba tried to organize a trade union for couriers to negotiate better rates and working conditions.
"I wrote about this on the group, what people thought about organizing a union. [...] people who work under this application are like slaves: no rights, no insurance, no personal protective equipment, nothing. Well, I thought that maybe this is a good time to meet with a union. [...] We got a proposal that we could use their offices, that we could formally organize under them, but there were no people to help us. We put out a request on the group... There are 5,000 members, a really large group. But if you ask whether anyone would like to do something, the response is minimal.” (Kuba, food delivery courier)

The effort to exert collective pressure on platforms failed due to workers’ lack of interest in unionization. Afterwards Kuba – aware of the exploitative component of platform work – started using a trick to circumvent the algorithmic control and boost his personal pay. Knowing his zone well and drawing from collective experiences, Kuba was sometimes able to log on to a platform as a car driver, despite riding a bike or scooter. The platform takes a higher fee from bike and scooter couriers than from car couriers, and car deliveries tend to be more profitable. This requires a lot of knowledge and experience, not only of shortcuts in his neighbourhood, but also a considerate assessment of a traffic to be able to meet the time requirements of deliveries set by the platform. In this way, Kuba is able to ‘revert’ the platform’s exploitative use of his personal resources, as well as to reappropriate some of the vehicle-related costs that he incurs but believes should be borne by the platform. Kuba used this trick intensively during COVID-19, both due to adverse developments in pay rates and because traffic was lighter, making the trick more effective.

Rafał, an experienced Uber driver who moved to Glovo during the pandemic, is highly critical of the platform business model and the way workers are treated. He followed a trajectory similar to Kuba. Rafal got involved in a small but cooperative group of couriers who
began a social media campaign against the removal of guaranteed rates during the lockdown. They were not only unable to gather enough workers interested in participating, but also faced scepticism and ironic comments. Rafał resigned attempting to mobilize his co-workers, instead developing a way of tricking the algorithm to improve his pay. Rafał found out that Glovo assigned newcomers more profitable deliveries to attract them. Naturally, newcomer status is only brief (as the algorithm soon learns who you are) and indeed is not necessarily profitable – as access to a platform’s time slots is dependent on a rating system which promotes seniority. Rafał and his friends developed a way of tricking the app into believing that they were newcomers without losing their ratings, though this required the cooperation of at least two drivers. In this way, Rafał was able to rebalance the uneven economic relationship with a platform that offloads the risks associated with demand fluctuations, exploiting his in-depth knowledge to trick the system and boost his income.

Second group of both online (Kaja, Matylda), and offline (Artur) workers undertake more individual attempts to mitigate or reduce the dependencies of platform work by trying to recreate quasi-SER conditions through forcing concessions from platforms or clients. Such workers combine social capital with conscious preference towards more standard form of employment. Thus, while the first subtype accepts, but at the same time subverts platform ideology by playing around the algorithms, the second subtype calls into question the very assumption of the ideology of platform work – the superiority of flexible, non-standard work over more classical arrangements. The reference to SER also resembles the forms of “weak” resistance discussed by Scott (1985, 348): “practices and norms that have proven effective in the past” appear to “offer some promise of reducing or reversing losses they suffer”. One example is Matylda, an Upwork translator largely sceptical of a business model based on algorithmic control and a necessity to overinvest in jobs to maintain good reviews. For a longer period before the COVID-19 outbreak, Matylda primarily worked with one key client on
Upwork. When first problems (before COVID-19) occurred, she was suddenly left without income after the client reduced demand. Matylda had to overwork and run down her savings to survive, making her realize the precariousness of her situation. To mitigate the lack of protection, Matylda voiced her problems to the clients concerned, obliging them to plan their commissions for her in advance, announce problems and fluctuations in demand earlier, as well as convincing them to pay her for previously unpaid research work. Moreover, she gained an additional client and ensured she had sufficient time to get other commissions to further reduce dependency. This allowed Matylda to secure a rigid 9-to-5 working schedule that immunized her private life against work disturbances and spill-overs. Matylda thus constructed a “hybrid” setup of platform work and permanent arrangements – a quasi-standard-setting recreating some protection associated with SER based on personal bargaining and informal relationship with clients. This setup cushioned the impact of the COVID-19: one of her major clients communicated his problems, announcing beforehand (in February 2020) that he would not have as much work for Matylda as usual. Thanks to the “hybrid” situation created by Matylda, she was able to plan her tasks ahead and increase the external clients’ “ratio” in her workweek, allowing her to preserve the same overall level of income.

A somewhat similar approach was undertaken by Artur, a Takeaway courier. Aware of the working time and income instability of platform work, Artur befriended dispatchers who then gave him priority when assigning time slots. Through such personal arrangements with those directly responsible for assigning slots, he secured and stabilized his income even during the post-COVID-19 slump in demand associated with an oversupply of labour.

6.3 Exit

Some workers (4 of the 30 workers in our sample) decided to – or attempted to – exit platform work as a reaction to the precariousness amplified by COVID-19. The non-standard
aspect of work was critically assessed and deemed irreconcilable with their personal preferences for stable working conditions in the context of limited resources that workers could mobilize to cope with instability. This concerned persons with rather lower earnings, lower and lower-middle class background within food delivery platforms (Tomasz, Michał, Mateusz) and one IT worker with an upper-middle class background, but who due to biographical reasons needed to quickly become financially autonomous (Filip). Unable to effectively voice their dissatisfaction, these workers manifest their will to operate under more permanent, predictable and regulated employment conditions and exit the platform economy.

This is well illustrated by the case of Michał, a worker with a long history of precarious but relatively standard positions (call centres and various office jobs). Fired from his regular job before the pandemic in February 2020, Michał found employment on Glovo just before the lockdown. His time schedule was initially full and there was still a guaranteed rate in his city, making platform work a relatively predictable source of income. Michał started struggling to earn a decent income shortly afterwards, when the guaranteed rate was removed and access to time slots became more difficult due to competition from new workers. Michał criticized practically every aspect of platform work differing from the SER model: unstable working hours, unpredictable income, not being paid for “idle” time, no sick leave, an obscure rating system, algorithmic control over his work, and the obligation to provide the means of transport himself. After a series of bad experiences, as well as several failed attempts at voicing them (to the platform itself, to the dispatchers, and to the intermediary with whom he had a contract), Michał decided to quit the platform. He was able to find a permanent “certain, ordinary job” in manufacturing. He is contemplating returning to platform work, but only as a side job – having a permanent position gives him more individual agency in the context of exploitative components of platform work.
Another case of an exit strategy (deployed but not completed at the time of the interview) was Filip, a Useme IT worker. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, Filip lived off licenses from the software he had created for sports competitions as quasi-rentier. With these cancelled as a result of pandemic, Filip unsuccessfully searched for a regular job. He joined the platform out of necessity, but remained highly critical of its business model, the lack of control over working hours, the extreme competition, and the necessity to overwork. Even though Filip did not necessarily want to work in a strictly dependent employment-like environment (he openly rejected the vision of being a “regular” employee), he was slowly quitting the platform economy to gain more influence over the economic relationships with his clients. He did this by developing informal ties with his clients outside the platforms and transitioning out of the platform model in general to operate either as a member of a team/permanent subcontractor. Filip was motivated by extreme cost competition and necessity to overcontribute to clients in order to maintain good reviews in the platform economy, which was not sustainable for him financially.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted platform workers in Poland. Within a standard employment relationship, companies are incentivized or forced to absorb economic shocks by protecting employment through regulations on dismissals and bargaining arrangements. Standard employees also have full access to social security. Within labour platforms, workers are not sheltered by similar social and legal structures and are therefore directly exposed to fluctuations in demand. Our findings illustrate that the absence of such protections can be deleterious for workers. The risks and costs associated with slumps and surges of demand during the pandemic have been transferred – due to platforms’ intermediary status – to workers. We found that the mid-term effects of the COVID-19 outbreak were similar
for both food delivery and online platforms. Workers on online platforms have experienced slump in demand right after the beginning of pandemic. Workers on food delivery platforms have faced initial higher demand, but shortly after – due to difficult situation on the traditional labour market – platforms were flooded with new workers. All platform workers have thus been experiencing higher competition, lower rates, instability of working time, and work intensification. Our study shows that – at least in the context of crisis – the differences in the situation between those working on different types of platforms are smaller than expected (see: Vallas & Schor 2020). As a result of the lack of protection associated with standard employment relationship, platform workers have been left largely alone in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic.

Platforms’ ability to structure operations as an intermediary, thus circumventing standard employment relationship, obscures the necessity to provide workers with rights, despite their dependency on, or even subordination to, platforms. In the case of food delivery platforms, subordination results from workers having limited control over their working hours, and not being autonomous in terms of tasks they have to perform or to the price for individual gigs (which translates into their income). Moreover, platforms exert a high level of control over the work itself, requiring availability within specific timeframes and sanctioning workers. Second, in the case of online platforms, our findings provide evidence of a high level of financial dependency on platforms, highlighting workers’ limited capacity to influence the economic relationship with clients. Workers are subject to platforms’ numerous self-regulatory settings that work to their detriment (e.g., the inability to renegotiate bids when a client has obscured the real content of a job; the necessity to overcontribute to tasks to maintain good reviews) and to which they have to adapt in order to maintain their income, without any instruments to bargain with the platform or clients. Third, both offline and online workers are tied to labour platforms, unable to easily transition between platforms or even to exit the
platform economy due to their dependency on platform work and the data such as reputation scores or portfolios being retained by the platform.

The level of platforms’ control over workers is not properly counterbalanced by platforms’ obligations vis-à-vis workers and by workers’ rights, forcing them to cope on their own during economic shocks. The strategies undertaken by workers during the COVID-19 outbreak reveal the need for workers to be provided with some protection.

We have conceptually grouped workers’ strategies deployed in the context of COVID-19 economic disturbance into three response categories: loyalty, hybrid strategies combining voice and loyalty, and exit. Overall, our findings illustrate that these strategies emerge from workers’ understanding of the difficulties they experience and their own framing of possible solutions, which rely on resources they may possess and on the objective institutional measures at hand. The research contributes to the discussions on Hirschman’s typology in several ways. Firstly, it demonstrates that voice and loyalty can coexist during crisis, where workers staying within organisation can also express their dissatisfaction with its functioning. Secondly, it offers a fine-grained picture of voice in the context in which collective action is seriously impeded – resembling the ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985). In such scenario, workers critical towards the model can utilize social capital and insiders’ knowledge to undertake individual actions aiming to improve their personal position by circumventing the algorithmic control.

Loyalty and hybrid strategies resemble each other when looked at in detail. They seem to involve three different dimensions, i.e. resources; institutional framework, and the working life and working patterns; all impacted by the lack of protection within labour platforms. This protection is aimed at: assuring that employers incur the costs associated with the production process (resource dimension); linking employee status with the rights to social security and
employment protection (institutional framework dimension); as well as structuring work and life boundaries.

Within the resource dimension, loyal workers utilize both their personal financial resources and their safety nets to survive economic shocks. This involves drawing on savings, overcontributing to tasks financially, and resorting to loans and family safety nets. “Dissenting” workers utilize their experience or support from groups of co-workers to trick algorithmic control (social capital and insider’s knowledge). This sometimes takes the shape of “workplace deviance” where innovative but forbidden activities are explored in order to re-appropriate some of the resources and to reverse the exploitation they believe they are subject to (Robinson and Bennett 1995), which was found in other studies as well (e.g. Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Similarly, such workers may use their social capital to negotiate within a platform.

Secondly, some workers attempt to leverage the institutional framework to re-balance the lack of the SER. This is representative to the problems related to fragmentation of social protection in reaction to the decline of SER as main tool regulating the labour markets. In the case of loyal workers, this involves “playing” the patchy welfare system, making use of unemployment schemes, benefits, and other support measures to cope. In the case of workers who voice their dissent, we see protest and mobilization attempts, classifiable as collective attempts to benefit from the fragmented institutional framework to put pressure on platforms to improve wages and working conditions. Among our interviewees, such attempts proved unsuccessful.

Within the working life and working patterns dimension, loyal workers tend to accept the costs associated with fluctuations in demand, tolerating the interference of platform work in their private lives. Our findings point to how the instability caused by the absence of the SER affects also the living conditions of workers. In their attempts to find solutions, workers use their repertoires of action, sacrificing leisure and private life to survive working on the
platform. Loyal workers view this as natural, primarily due to previous experiences with precarious working conditions – in line with the “normalization” strategies followed by other precarious workers (Morgan, Wood, and Nelligan 2013). Additionally, we see loyal workers rationalizing their unstable situation and lack of protection as a temporary situation, as is the case of young food delivery couriers at the beginning of their careers. This is again representative for the sector dominated by young workers and treated as a prelude to the “real” career. Conversely, but within the same dimension of adaptation of working lives patterns, workers who voice their objections to platform work and renegotiate their situation are sometimes able to combine platform work with quasi-permanent assignments – what we call a “hybridization” strategy. Such “hybrids” aim to recreate some of the protective mechanisms typical of a regulated employment relationship but based on individual bargaining and personal ties with clients or platform management, supported by workers’ social capital.

Polish gig workers – unlike their counterparts in other countries – seem to follow voice strategies based more on individual adaptations within the resource and working life dimensions. We see only rare attempts at protest and mobilization, with most “dissenting” workers trying to either individually define their relations with clients or platforms (in the form of hybridization), or to “beat the system”, tricking and hacking algorithmic control. This seems to stem from well-described characteristics of platform work hindering collective voice. Platforms present themselves as a temporary solution or a side-job adding up to the unstable relationship they have with workers, which in Polish context is intertwined with general low strength of labour movement (Czarzasty and Mrozowicki 2018). This all incentivizes workers to pursue more low-profile forms of resistance, drawing from collective experiences to improve their individual situation in a less confrontational manner and without significant impact on the improvement of working conditions for the collective of workers.
Finally, some workers – with limited capabilities of using non-work resources such as economic or social capital, or institutional framework and objecting to the lack of protection and the extreme consequences of COVID-19-related work intensification and wage uncertainty – decide to exit the platform economy. Unable to effectively voice their dissatisfaction, they manifest their will to operate under more permanent, predictable and regulated employment conditions.

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