

With a global pandemic still raging, delivering food is a dangerous job. But in a context of high unemployment and little social protection, many platform couriers in the UK and across the globe face an impossible choice between penury and infection.

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# Who pays the price for your takeaway?

↓ An Uber Eats courier rides through the deserted streets of the Scottish capital Edinburgh during the first lockdown of 2020.  
Photo: © Belga



Adam<sup>1</sup> is one of Britain's 4.7 million gig workers. He's been cycling around the London borough of Hoxton since early 2019. Delivery work used to be his side hustle — extra cash to supplement his job as a caseworker for a leading British NGO (non-governmental organisation). All of this changed, however, when the Covid-19 pandemic cost him his job, along with 1.72 million other Britons<sup>2</sup>. Now, with riding as his only source of income, he spends his days delivering food down eerily empty streets.

Like many other riders Adam is angry and frustrated. The work is exhausting and the pay poor; benefits are as nonexistent as opportunities for advancement or escape. "With two children to feed, what other option did I have? It's become practically impossible to find any other job."

Millions of other delivery workers are in the same situation: over-qualified, under-paid, financially precarious, and with little or no access to social protection. Uber Eats, Deliveroo and other similar delivery platforms have been credited for creating innovative business models that offer workers "choice and flexibility" (Pasquale 2016). Their marketing highlights the perks of "being your own boss" while simultaneously earning "great money" (Gregory 2020). Such a strategy purposefully conceals the risky aspects of the work, instead offering a glamorised image of hip, young males effortlessly cycling through the urban environment. But for most riders, delivery work is a dangerous poverty trap from which it is difficult to escape.

Depending on the area in which they ride, the pay is on average between 8 to 13 pounds per hour, not far off the British national minimum wage of 8.72 (Müller 2021). Due to their employment status, riders have until recently been excluded from the protective wing of the Health and Safety at Work Act as they were not classified as workers but as "independent contractors". The exclusion of riders from occupational health and safety legislation has placed them at serious risk, as road accidents are overwhelmingly common. "It's not a matter of if it will happen but when," reports an Edinburgh-based courier. In case of injury, "on-demand" workers have no sick pay and at best receive only minimal support from the platforms; they also have little to no access to state social protection. Worse still, riders can be laid off without warning at the whim of an opaque algorithm and thus

live in a state of permanent uncertainty (Bérastégui 2021).

Even prior to the pandemic, taken together these factors created an environment where it is impossible for a full-time delivery worker to earn an income that guarantees a decent standard of living, let alone to save to any meaningful extent. And because banks refuse to extend loans on the basis of such temporary, variable employment, buying a home or even a car are impossible, distant dreams. Riders are therefore forced to live "on hold" until a more stable form of employment that guarantees a secure source of income becomes available.

### Riding through Covid-19

Riders have reported extreme difficulties in making it through the pandemic. A report from the Oxford-based Fairwork Foundation shows that gig workers have seen their incomes shrink by two thirds on average, leaving many without the ability to meet necessary expenses despite their willingness to work<sup>3</sup>. They have no control over the decrease: their hours are fixed by an algorithm. Furthermore, the number of riders has more than doubled since the start of the pandemic, as stay-at-home rules have increased demand for online grocery orders and restaurant takeaways, while at the same time many formerly employed people have lost their jobs and turned to this form of work. This surfeit of available riders has resulted in slashed hours for those already trapped in total reliance on delivery work as a source of income.

Through its effects on the food delivery industry, the pandemic has deepened the fracture lines of inequality. Not just between delivery couriers and those who are covered by a government-provided safety net, but also in terms of nationality and race, as migrant and minority ethnic riders form a core part of the food delivery workforce.

Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed much more than the number of riders and the hours they're able to work. It has also significantly increased the risks workers are exposed to, forcing many to face an impossible choice between penury and infection.

There has been widespread reporting on the difficulty riders face in adhering to

physical distancing guidelines. By its very nature, delivery work requires a high degree of human contact: exchanging food, waiting shoulder to shoulder with other riders for food to be prepared, talking to and standing near restaurant workers, and sharing space with supermarket workers and shoppers.

Most platforms have rolled out policies intended to help curb its spread, such as contact-free and cashless delivery services. But many of these policies seem to be aimed at protecting the customers more than the riders — workers must still collect the food by waiting in crowded pickup zones. To give another example, Uber Eats has responded to the pandemic with a policy that ostensibly requires sick workers to stay home. It provides couriers with 30 pounds per day plus an extra of up to 100 pounds weekly for a period of up to 15 days of illness. Although this may sound generous, when basing it

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1. All names have been changed or omitted to guarantee the gig workers' anonymity.
2. National statistical office, Unemployment figures, [www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment) [accessed 1 February 2021]
3. The Fairwork Project, 2020, Fairwork Report on Platforms' Covid-19 Policies, <https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2020/09/COVID-19-Report-September-2020.pdf>

on a standard eight-hour working day, the lump sum does not even cover two thirds of what a worker would earn in that same timespan on national minimum wage. And of course, the course of a typical Covid-19 infection can be far longer than 15 days, with many sufferers needing up to eight weeks to recover.

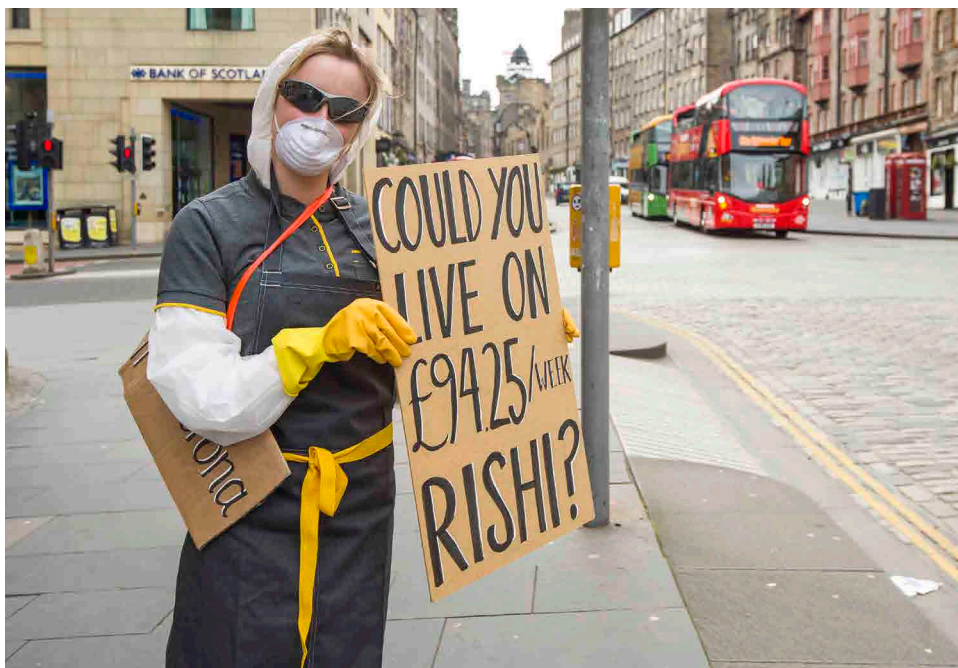
Other platforms are facing similar problems and additional complications. Deliveroo couriers in the UK have noted that despite the platform's rollout of financial support policies, many of them have been unable to request such benefits. Some platforms, for example, require a medical sick note, and although this may have become progressively easier, in the first few months of the pandemic it was near impossible to get tested for Covid-19.

And of course, the more hours a rider works, the greater their exposure and risk of contracting the virus and spreading it through their communities. Due to the inherent precariousness of such a form of work, some had to continue to ride even though they suspected being ill. "It was irresponsible, but I had literally no other option. I knew I was sick with Covid, but I couldn't afford to stay home," says a young rider from Crawley (in the southern county of West Sussex).

## Collective action

But with the worsening of working conditions, last year also saw an increase in collective action. Workers around the world have mobilised in response to the dangerous conditions they face in providing essential services during a global pandemic, especially when they are protected by neither their *de facto* employers nor their governments. In Britain, workers have even engaged in lengthy legal battles, relating in particular to the contractual status of gig workers.

*The work is exhausting and the pay poor.*



*"I knew I was sick with Covid, but I couldn't afford to stay home."*

↑ A McDonald's and Deliveroo driver on 0 hours contract protests outside Edinburgh's high court on the Royal Mile.  
Photo: © Belga

One highlight has been the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB). Thanks in part to a major public crowd-funding initiative, the union has won a long-standing battle with the government. IWGB barristers argued that the UK government had failed in its obligation to transpose EU health and safety directives into UK law. In the EU, health and safety legislation is extended to all individuals classified as workers, including gig workers. The courts agreed with the IWGB's analysis, finding that workers in the "gig economy" have been denied rights they are due under EU health and safety directives. All workers now have the right both to refuse unsafe work and to be provided with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

Although the recent ruling marks a landmark case for the protection of gig workers, riders are still having to put their lives at risk for a takeout. The hyper-flexible, on-demand work arrangements force riders to live hand to mouth, unable to make plans for the future, leaving thousands of couriers vulnerable to both Covid-19 and an unpredictable loss of income. ●



## FURTHER READING

Bérestégui P. (2021) Exposure to psychosocial risk factors in the gig economy, Report 2021.01, Brussels, ETUI.

Gregory K. (2020) 'My life is more valuable than this': understanding risk among on-demand food couriers in Edinburgh, *Work, Employment and Society*.

Müller T. (2021) European statutory minimum wage map, Infographic, Brussels, ETUI. Available on [https://www.etui.org/facts\\_figures/european-statutory-minimum-wage-map](https://www.etui.org/facts_figures/european-statutory-minimum-wage-map)

Pasquale F. (2016) Two narratives of platform capitalism, *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 35, 309.