

Delivering for FoodTech: at your own risk

You now see them everywhere in the city. Food takeaway couriers have taken possession of city roads. Within less than five years, the digital platforms have amassed whole battalions of young riders. But practised under such conditions, is riding really that good for your health?

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In Brussels the Deliveroo food delivery platform encourages its couriers to gather at hubs, like here on chic avenue Louise.

Images: © Martine Zunini (p. 17, 19, 20)



The young man's face is full of thick scars, the result of an accident in July 2016. Barthélemy, a student from Bordeaux working evenings for the Belgian Take Eat Easy platform, crashed into a car and his head went through the rear window.

"I was riding fast and a car braked hard in front of me. The more you're out on your bike delivering meals, the more you earn", he was to explain to the press.

While the majority of accidents are less serious, skids, more or less heavy falls, collisions with other road users, taxi doors that open suddenly in front of them are what delivery riders have to put up with every day – but nothing to really worry about! Many riders just say: "These are the risks that come with the job." This tendency to play down the health consequences of their work may be explained by the young age of the riders and by the fact that many of them uphold the "biker" culture.

"I didn't want to have a possible death on my conscience."

Arthur, self-employed courier

1. The forenames of the self-employed couriers working for Deliveroo and cited in this article have been changed, as their contracts contain a confidentiality clause which continues to apply "after having finished working for the platform, ad infinitum".

2. Whatever their status (student, self-employed, etc.), the principle applied by the three current leading players in the sector (Deliveroo, Foodora, UberEats) is the same: the "partner" uses his own equipment (bike or scooter, smartphone, helmet, etc.), making sure that all are in good working order at his own expense. The platform provides him with sportswear and rainwear featuring the company logo and, of course, the insulated bag. However, the rider has to pay a ca. €100 deposit for these.

"There's something seductive about becoming a courier. A bit exotic, a touch of New York, a bit radical – out in the urban jungle on a bike", stated one courier riding for Deliveroo who wanted to remain anonymous¹.

In contrast to regularly-employed professional couriers working for traditional bike delivery companies, this self-employed rider had no work-related accident insurance. And as he didn't consider it necessary to take out a policy with a private insurance company – in line with most other self-employed couriers in Brussels –, he risks having to pay for all the costs associated with medical care himself in the case of an accident and of losing his sole source of income if he's not able to get back on his bike quick enough.

That's exactly what happened to Idriss. "I got knocked down by a bus. As a result of the accident, I was under shock. I didn't want to go out any more, didn't want to get on my bike. I stopped for a whole week. My €1 800 bike was a wreck. I had to buy a new, but much cheaper one"², said the 22-year-old self-employed rider, stating that he rode between 9 and 12 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Safety: the gap between words and deeds

How do the platforms react in the case of an accident? If we are to believe what the riders say, one could think that they don't really care. In the case of an accident, the procedure to follow is to contact customer service. If the rider can't continue riding, he is logged off the application. If the goods carried are still OK, another rider is dispatched to the site of the accident to take them over and deliver them to the customer.

Although nearly all of the thirty Brussels Deliveroo riders interviewed praised the good, easy-going contacts they had with platform staff – in particular the customer service centre –, many complained about the lack of empathy in the case of an accident.

"I had an accident and required stitches. When I rang them up, all they asked me was whether the meal was OK. They didn't bother about how I was doing", remembered Steve, a student.

While safety is a leitmotiv at Deliveroo, apart from checking the condition of the

bike during recruitment, few concrete measures are taken. Wearing a helmet is advised (it's not mandatory in Belgium), but nobody checks whether people follow this recommendation. And if you're out on your bike on a hot July day, odds are you won't be wearing one.

Benoît, while always wearing a helmet, often interprets the highway code his own way: "I often go through red lights. But carefully", he admitted. "It's impossible to do this work and to fully respect the highway code. You can't meet the deadlines if you're stuck at red lights all the time. You can lose 2 - 3 minutes on each light."

While the latest arrival on the Brussels market, the US UberEats, does not even bother to check that its riders' bikes are in good working order and that the riders themselves are capable of riding in the city, Deliveroo has a selection procedure requiring an accompanied city ride. Called a "trial run" in the company's business jargon, this test was originally supervised by a Deliveroo employee in Belgium. It has since been subcontracted to experienced self-employed riders.

Arthur once accepted going out with candidates on these trial runs. "They offered two euros for each candidate. I stopped after an incident occurred, with one of the candidates just missing getting hit by a bus. I didn't want to have a possible death on my conscience. That's was just too much responsibility", he stated.

The riders supervising the trial runs are called "ambassadors" by Deliveroo, and the platform supplies them with a distinctive jacket. "They basically play on your ego, giving you the feeling that you've got an edge over the rest of the couriers due to the distinctive sign. But riders who manage to carry out 1000 deliveries also get given a distinctive jacket", said Arthur with a touch of irony.

The heir to Take Eat Easy, Deliveroo relies on people's passion for cycling to recruit and motivate riders, benefiting from the performance spirit of many of its couriers.

Some even compete in international competitions of cycle couriers – the last world cup, which took place in Paris in August 2016, was sponsored by the London platform. In such a context, the dividing line between leisure and work becomes blurred.

"When I'm on my bike, I don't feel as if I'm working", said one of the few women couriers opposite the Bourse de Bruxelles, one of

"When I'm on my bike, I don't feel as if I'm working."

A young woman courier



the main gathering places for couriers in the Belgian capital. "The money I earn delivering food is just on-top. I get enough money from my parents to live on. If I didn't work for the platform, I'd be here with my friends anyway", added this student, before continuing a conversation – totally incomprehensible for the uninitiated – on fixed-gear bikes.

Shorts with digital markings

Contrary to what one might think, Benoît, the rider prone to going through red lights, is anything but a "hothead". He does not belong to the biker community on which Deliveroo depended when it started recruiting its first "partners". He doesn't ride a "fixie", one of those fixed-gear bikes without brakes on which aficionados can shift at speeds of up to 60 km, but instead a 10-year-old mountain bike.

The cooperative model: a credible remedy against Uberisation?

In Belgium, Deliveroo pays the majority (at least 85%) of its partners via a cooperative called SMart (acronym for a *société mutuelle pour artistes*). Set up in 1998, SMart originally addressed arts and stage professionals not wanting to work in a self-employed capacity. Being a member of a "*société mutuelle*" – SMart has since adopted the legal status of a cooperative – means that they can be paid as employees.

SMart has expanded greatly since, and now operates in nine European countries and has some 100 000 members, mainly artists, but increasingly journalists, photographers, translators, etc. And as of 2015 – but just in Belgium – takeaway couriers. An expansion not welcomed by everyone. Certain organisations, and in particular unions, are of the opinion that the cooperative encourages the establishment

of precarious forms of employment in sectors as yet little affected.

For Sarah Ledant, project leader at SMart, such accusations are unfounded. By signing up couriers, the cooperative was not seeking to dope its workforce, but instead simply trying to respond to a fact, she stated.

"The ball started rolling when a graphic designer invoiced us for courier services. Numbers of couriers registered with us grew rapidly. We started getting worried about their working conditions, as we quickly realised that they were not achieving the minimum wage through their work. Indeed, the 'priority booking' system used by the now defunct Take Eat Easy involved paying couriers for each delivery and not by the hour. Only couriers deemed to perform sufficiently well were assigned deliveries by the platform. The others stayed out in the cold. To remedy this situation, we knocked on Take Eat Easy's and Deliveroo's door with an agreement corresponding to the legal minimum required under Belgian legislation, especially with regard to minimum 3-hour paid work periods", she explained.

When Take Eat Easy went bankrupt in July 2016, the cooperative guaranteed the payment of the sums due to its members, while the self-employed couriers in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe went home empty-handed.

The couriers paid via the cooperative – which charges 6% of their income for its services – are also covered by work-related accident insurance and third-party liability insurance, and their social security contributions are paid. For Sarah Ledant, these elements explain why the latest arrival on the Belgian market, the US platform UberEats, quickly terminated the discussions it had initiated with the cooperative on starting up on Belgian market. At the end of October, Deliveroo followed suit, also ending its "marriage" with the cooperative. The platform justified this move by stating its desire to offer its couriers greater flexibility, something the minimum 3-hour block system imposed by SMart did not allow. "We have been convinced for a long time that the large amounts of capital available in these so-called 'disruptive' platforms are partly dedicated to perpetrating a perfectly concerted, massive and intense social disruption", replied SMart in a vitriolic statement.

"I'm no professional biker. I picked up a mountain bike which had been lying around in a garage but which was in very good working order. I was thus able to start without investing anything. After an unhappy time spent working in a job in line with my qualifications, I looked for a job that was easy to perform, didn't require much creativity, and was reasonably well-paid. I could carry on working in a self-employed capacity, while at the same time doing work in line with my training", said the university graduate.

As with the majority of interviewed Deliveroo riders, this "slasher"³ was very happy with his choice. He can be considered as "privileged", as he is one of the few riders with fixed working hours. "This working time stability was indispensable for me, as it enables me to do my two jobs without the one getting in the way of the other", he said.

This is a luxury not available to most other riders. People are constantly applying, and sometimes the supply of riders outstrips demand (see box, p. 21). This has now reached such a stage that the riders' cooperatives, set up in the last few months to represent workers in the sector, are starting to demand a hiring freeze.

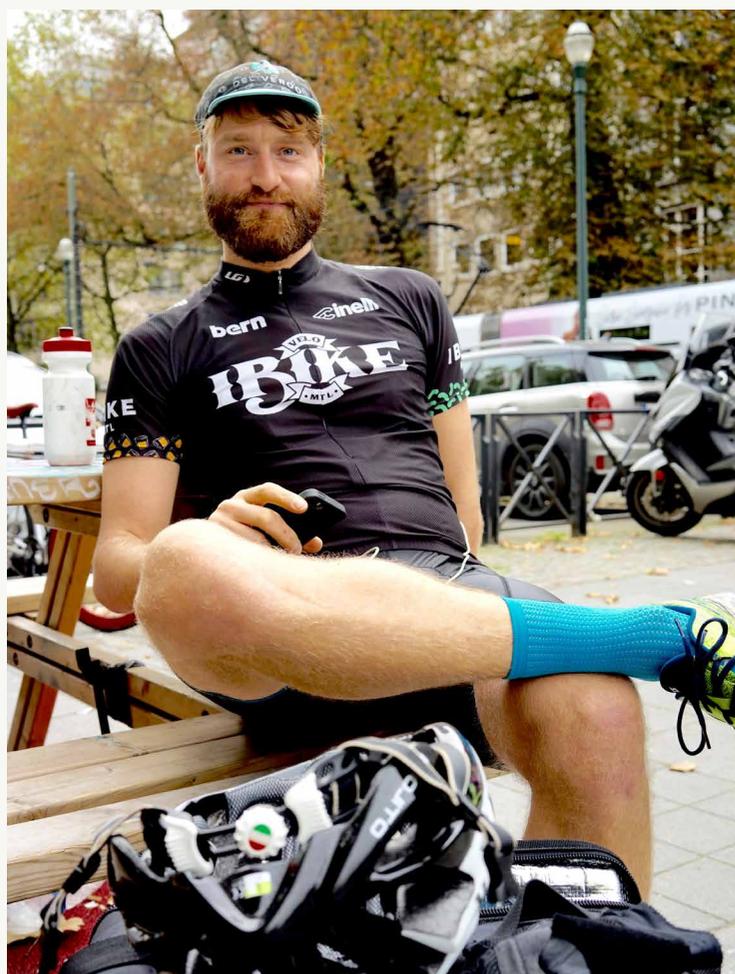
Fuelled by an increasingly varied social breeding ground – the "bikers" and "slashers" have been joined by a new, even younger, cohort from working-class districts –, the leading platforms have started dropping low-rated riders.

"Deliveroo disconnected me because I refused more than 20% of orders they sent me", said Bastien, a 20-year-old rider who has since started working – on an e-bike – for Takeaway.com, a Dutch platform specialised in delivering pizzas.

Thanks to geolocation, platforms now have a mass of data allowing them to evaluate the effectiveness of their workforce: the average time taken to deliver meals, average speed, their knowledge of the city, etc.

Apart from this objective data, the feedback of restaurant owners and customers on service quality and rider behaviour allows a platform to rank its riders. And bad luck for those who haven't understood that "the customer is king."

"The golden rule is: we do what the customer requires of us. If a customer wants me to climb several flights of stairs to deliver



3. A term emanating from the United States and referring to young people with several jobs.

4. Further reading: Tassirani A. and Maccarrone V. (2017) The mobilisation of gig economy couriers in Italy: some lessons for the trade union movement, *Transfer*, 23(3), 353–357.

5. For a fuller overview of measures mobilising couriers in Europe, see: Callum Cant, Precarious Couriers are Leading the Struggle Against Platform Capitalism, *Political Critique*, 3 August 2017. Available on: <http://politicalcritique.org>

Sylvain, a former DJ, now a biker.

"I had an accident and required stitches. When I rang them up, all they asked me was whether the meal was OK. They didn't bother about how I was doing."

Steve, student rider

something to a client's door, I'll do it. We are required to always behave impeccably, to always be polite and respectful. If that's not the case, we get down on our knees and apologise", observed Benoît, without taking offence.

For a long time, Benjamin believed he belonged to the elite of Brussels couriers: "For several months, I was in Deliveroo's good books. I got emails praising my work, I was ranked as one of their top riders. But then things started going downhill. They summoned me, telling me about complaints from restaurant owners. I tumbled down their ranking. They tried to make me look like someone with bad character, something that really rattled me. Restaurant owners can say anything they want about us. The platform just doesn't care about our side of the story."

Benjamin, who got paid via SMart, suspects that Deliveroo wants to reduce the number of its couriers belonging to this cooperative, as this type of worker was becoming too expensive. Perhaps intuition, four months after our meeting with this young father – now working for the Belgian post –, this is just what has happened (see box, p. 19).

Burgeoning protest

Faced with the downward development of their pay, inversely proportional to the rise in their work (see box), takeaway couriers have started setting up organisations to represent their collective interests. Using mainly the social media to mobilise and put forward their demands, they are for the most part local movements.

The first protest movements emerged in London in summer 2016 in reaction to Deliveroo's decision to stop paying its couriers by the hour and instead by delivery. A similar pattern was repeated – for identical reasons – in other European cities. In October 2016, couriers in Turin working for the German Foodora platform logged off the application for three weeks⁴.

In Germany, several protest actions took place last spring at the initiative of the Freie Arbeiter-Union, an anarchist quasi-union organisation in Berlin. In Spain, Riders x Derechos conducted "log off" actions in early July in four Spanish cities in protest against the extreme precariousness of couriers⁵.

First the carrot, then the stick

"Flexible work, competitive fees. Want to ride with us? Apply now!" The offer posted on the deliveroo.be website is seductive. Indeed, the offer turned out to be a spectacular success wherever the platform started up following its launch in London in 2013.

Like Uber taxi drivers, the cycle couriers soon became disenchanted. With a view to attracting a maximum number of couriers, Deliveroo – in the wake of the July 2016 bankruptcy of its rival Take Eat Easy – offered couriers working for the Belgian platform a relatively attractive hourly rate, while at the same time launching a comprehensive recruitment campaign. The result: "many are called but few are chosen". With the exception of top-ranking riders with a guaranteed number of hours, the rest of the Deliveroo fleet have to log on to the platform's website at 18:00 on the dot on a Wednesday in the hope of being given a "shift" (a 3-hour slice of guaranteed work). Within a few minutes, all shifts for the following week are taken up.

But "established" unions are only rarely actively involved in these actions. Vida, the Austrian union for transport and service workers, supported the establishment of a works council – the world's first in the digital platform sector – at Foodora in April 2017. In France, a self-employed courier is organising cycle couriers in the Gironde region at the initiative of the CGT union, with Bordeaux, the region's main city, the scene of the first mobilisations. These targeted Deliveroo following last July's announcement that the platform would be ending its pay system based on hourly rates – a system enjoyed by the longest-serving riders. The movement spread to other French cities and culminated with protest actions in Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon and Nantes on 27 and 28 August.

In Belgium, the first demonstration of takeaway couriers took place at the end of July. It was organised by a riders' action group and two federations belonging to the CSC, one of the two major Belgian unions, to protest

Such competition obviously does not incite riders to protest. And it does not just affect occasional couriers. Those whose income is (virtually) exclusively dependent on working for the platforms are finding that their pay is slowly declining.

"In September 2016, I signed a contract for € 11 gross an hour and € 2 per delivery, without counting tips. The new contracts offered to self-employed riders are for € 7 per delivery, with a € 25 bonus for every 50 deliveries. With the new system, you face catastrophe when you don't get any deliveries", said one Brussels courier.

This change in the pay system gets riders riding as quickly as possible to get in as many deliveries as possible.

"Many are now taking more risks. They're jumping lights, riding at higher speeds" observed Laetitia Dablanc, a researcher working for IFSTTAR, the French Institute of Science and Technology for Transport, Development and Networks, which is coordinating a – still running – survey of cycle couriers in Paris.

against the relocation of Deliveroo Belgium's customer service centre to Madagascar.

But apart from these actions, the major unions seen to be dragging their feet. Asked about the protest action in Brussels, Martin Willems (CSC) did not view it as a sign of disinterest on the part of the established unions, but rather as a desire to let the movement develop at its own pace.

The union official, himself a cycling fan, has a good insight into the courier "community" and its libertarian spirit. Rather than being an obstacle to collective organisation, he views it as an opportunity for the union movement to develop.

"The challenge associated with this so-called 'new economy' is undoubtedly the chance to take unionism back to its roots, without the use of the institutional tools developed over the past 100 years, yet returning to the true sense of the term 'organising workers', by themselves and for themselves", he wrote on his union's website. ●