

DIARY OF A FOOD COURIER

A month as a Wolt driver taught me how the platform economy works.

Some time ago, artist Joel Karppanen met his Czech colleague Kryštof who made his modest living as a Wolt driver. They exchanged their roles for a month: Karppanen rode a bike through the slushy streets of Helsinki and took orders from the Wolt app. Wolt and other platform economy companies have grown at a rapid speed. Meanwhile the drivers feel that their terms of labor are being constantly debased.

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March 16th. I have a blue backpack on. I take a selfie in the elevator and send it to my friends. *New job*, I add in writing.

The first hour is quiet.

At 10:35, my phone rings twice. I accept the order, make a U-turn and in a couple of minutes, I've pedaled my way to Citycenter, or the Sausage House as it's referred to by people of Helsinki. I lock my bicycle, enter the mall and ride the escalator to the bottom floor. I grab 12 donuts from the restaurant and set the package neatly into my backpack. The customer is less than a kilometer away. Mannerheimintie is under renovation, and the bike lane cuts off. A working man snaps at me as I cut through the car lane. I manage to deliver the order in time to the lobby of an office building. There's a thermos box reserved for food deliveries. I mark the order as delivered and make 4.45 euros. A new order rings right away. Some baguette from Kaisaniemi to a hotel in Kaartinkaupunki.

The third order is a bundle: first a burrito from a Mexican restaurant, and then two hamburger meals in the same ride. The road leads to Ullanlinna.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

Someone has ordered two salmon soups and lemon muffins from their downstairs café. I get the portions and deliver them upstairs. I make 4.22 euros.

By afternoon I have delivered 13 orders. Then the phone stops ringing.

Delivery area: Helsinki Central.

Demand in area: Quiet.

So tells me my boss, the Wolt Partners application. At all times, the screen displays the three levels of demand: quiet, normal, and busy. For the most part of the day, the demand is quiet which means that the app offers two orders per hour at best. Normally a bicycle courier delivers around four orders in an hour, and in busy times it's possible to reach up to eight orders, especially if one travels on a fast two-wheel Segway.

The algorithm assigns the deliveries arbitrarily. You get the assignment if you happen to be near the restaurant or the store that the customer is ordering from. The app tells you where the next order is coming from and where it needs to be delivered to, and gives an estimate of the fee. The driver can either accept or decline the order. The course of the day and its itinerary are dictated by the orders. (According to Wolt, the algorithm doesn't assign the orders randomly. The company-released "algorithmic transparency report" states that the app takes into account the driver's location, the capacity of their vehicle and whether or not the driver is available.)

Now lunch time is just about over. Seven people carrying blue backpacks wait for new assignments by the concentration of restaurants on Iso Roobertinkatu. I sit down on an empty bench and nod to greet them. I'm the only white person in the crowd, only here as a tourist.

In reality I am a middle class artist. *Looking for a food courier to engage in a year-long collaboration with a photographer*, said the fliers that I wrote and handed out in Helsinki city center in the summer of 2022.

It was then that I met a Czech man called Kryštof. He is thirty years old, as am I, and resembles me in appearance too. We are also connected by the same occupation, we are both visual artists by our education. Kryštof had come to Finland for the first time in 2018 through the Erasmus exchange program. Relationships with people made him stick around but he needed to earn money. Kryštof decided to apply to be a Wolt Driver because he enjoyed biking.

At first, the work was pleasant to him, and there were enough gigs to go around. In his most active months, his gross earnings reached just shy of two thousand euros. In January of 2021, for example, he earned 1 686 euros. When the taxes were deducted along with the commission for the billing service and the pension insurance payment, he was left with a bit more than 1 300 euros. There are two kinds of Wolt drivers: those who earn a little extra income by occasional deliveries and those whose livelihood is entirely dependent on food delivery. Kryštof has balanced in between these modes as he has fortunately had some temp jobs in the art field.

Ever since our first meeting, I have photographed Kryštof weekly, both at work and in his free time. Now we have swapped roles for four weeks. I will deliver food so that Kryštof can focus on his art for a full month.

The swap process proceeded in a simple fashion. In the beginning of March, we filled out a form that asked for both of our personal information. I had to provide an ID card that included a picture of me. A week later I received an email telling me that I had been accepted as his replacement. I wasn't given any instructions or training so all that was left for Kryštof to take care of.

If I break any rules, Wolt may decide to end both mine and Kryštof's contract.

March 17th. On the morning of my second work day, my Wolt helmet breaks. The company has provided me with a gear package that includes the helmet, a backpack, a light jacket and a winter coat with the word “partner” on their chest, a beanie, a t-shirt, hand sanitizer, face masks and a phone holder. The gear is on loan from the company. If I lose the backpack, I have to pay 85 euros. Wolt notes the jacket to be worth 50 euros, the t-shirt 15 euros, the beanie ten euros. Additionally, I am now entitled to courier benefits such as a six percent discount to car maintenance at Euromaster, a 15 percent discount to physical examination at Puhti laboratory and a free 45-day trial for BookBeat.

I manage to get the helmet strap somewhat in place but I decide that I’d rather use my own helmet instead.

To wit, the “Courier Partner Service Agreement” states: *Wolt does not warrant the quality of any items sold or otherwise handed over by Wolt to the Courier Partner and Wolt shall not be liable for any defects or other deficiencies of the items or for any personal injury, direct or indirect damages resulting thereof. Any items sold or otherwise handed over by Wolt to the Courier Partner are handed over “as is”.*

The sunshine feels like spring but my misfortunes continue. First, I get my trousers caught in the chain ring and they tear at the leg. Then my blue thermos backpack breaks, despite the fact that I assembled it like I was dutifully going through an Ikea furniture manual. The fabric of the pack has ripped next to the zipper during a delivery but the tear is so small that I can keep on working with it.

Today I see other white people on the job but most of the food couriers are young immigrant men. Some of them are academically educated but haven’t been able to secure work to match their degrees due to things like a lack of fluency in Finnish. Wolt drivers are part of a new working class that has emerged in Finland in recent years.

But the platform economy didn’t pop up from nowhere. Outsourcing temporary and atypical jobs on poor terms of labor has gradually become more common as decades have gone by. Scholars refer to it as precarization. First came temporary agency work where the company in need of workforce makes a contract with a company that provides workforce. The employer is therefore the personnel hire company but the work itself is done to the other company. Finland has utilized temporary agency work since the 1960s, especially in the shipyard industry from where it spread to other industries. In the 1980s, it was used to bypass certain obligations related to work, social and tax legislation. This was quickly remediated by new regulations. Temporary agency work was made subject to license when Finland ratified the convention by the International Labour Organization that pertained to the matter. However, this convention was abandoned during the recession in 1992. It was thought that temporary jobs were better than no employment at all.

At the turn of the century, part-time jobs began increasing. The working poor was the designated name for people who, in order to make ends meet, either have to work multiple jobs to get by or to complement their income with social welfare.

Precarization can be seen in statistics. Currently there are 2.6 million working people in Finland and 37 percent of them have something other than a permanent full-time job. Their incomes vary often and are difficult to predict. The line between work and free time has also been blurred. A large part of the work time is swallowed up by unpaid labor: looking for

assignments and waiting, checking up on notifications, and so forth.

In recent years, personnel hire companies were joined by digital platform companies: Wolt, Foodora, Uber, Bolt, Yango and many others. In temporary agency work, the worker was an employee for the personnel hire company whereas in platform work, often there is no employment contract between parties. Platform workers work in between entrepreneurship and employment. They are responsible for their own billing as well as their expenses, from work equipment to pension insurance payments.

Companies like Wolt base their business on immaterial capital. The value is formed by the data and the interactions between people. To give an example: a smart phone app connects the person in need of a ride to a person that can provide it. Or when one person is hungry, another one prepares the food, and a third person delivers it. The mediating step in this is developed by a technology company, an application or in other words, a platform.

The platform economy has grown at rapid speed. In the years 2016–2020, the industry profits in Europe rose from three billion euros to 14 billion euros. The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the growth.

According to a report commissioned by the European Commission, there are already 28 million people working within the platform economy in EU countries, and the amount is expected to double in a few years. 41 percent of them are cab drivers, and 24 percent of them work in courier services, food couriers being one of them. According to the report, more than half of platform workers earn less than the net minimum wage per hour in their country, if said country has a legally determined minimum.

Food courier services are currently offered in Finland by Wolt and Foodora, the latter owned by the German company Delivery Hero. They have practically supplanted home delivery services provided by the restaurants themselves. A company called Gastronautti was the pioneer of this in Finland, starting food deliveries in Helsinki, Tampere and Turku in 2003. The company was owned by well-known Turku-based businessman Heikki Salmela. The Gastronautti drivers were directly employed by the company. A few years later the company filed for bankruptcy, and Salmela suffered millions in losses. Since then, he has panned the whole platform economy.

“If someone claims that they can deliver food on three euros and turn a profit, there’s a hundred percent guarantee that they’re evading regulations. If you abide by labor agreements, it’s impossible”, Salmela said in a *Helsinki Sanomat* interview in 2015.

Of course, platform work can seem appealing if you’re looking for work. One doesn’t need education nor really any expertise for it either. All you need is a smart phone and preferably a couple of back-up power sources to charge it during drives. Any vehicle will do: a bicycle, an electric scooter or a car, even couriers on skis have been sighted during winters. One doesn’t need to write long applications or go through work interviews – it only takes a couple of minutes to fill out the form. Language skills don’t make a difference either because there’s very little communication with customers, and the company-provided app is coded for most languages. However, many people have to wait up to a whole year before they can get started on their work because there are currently a lot less available positions than there are people applying for them.

Because there are so many drivers compared to the number of orders, an individual courier can get only so many assignments. Many drivers wonder why Wolt keeps recruiting new drivers despite this. Concern is justified. For example, the amount of platform

drivers in the USA grew significantly from 2013 to 2018 but concurrently the income of an individual driver diminished to half from earlier.

My second work day lasts six hours. I bike 70 kilometers and make 70 euros. I feel the day in my legs more than I do after squat day at the gym. Kryštof sends me words of encouragement: *You've worked hard!*

March 18th. I log myself online from home. Because I live in the bustling area of Sörnäinen, I might as well sit on my couch until my first order rings. Many of the other Wolt drivers I've encountered live away from the inner city, like in East Helsinki, Espoo or Vantaa.

There's a problem with the first delivery. The door code doesn't work. I have to call the customer.

"Good evening from Wolt! I have your burger, can you come down to pick it up?"

It's Saturday and I've figured that today's evening shift must be pretty quiet. After all, people have time to go to restaurants on weekends. Apparently not. Ordering food to your doorstep has been made too easy. It's a busy evening and I don't have time for a meal break. The pedals feel surprisingly light. I have my mom in my headphones.

"What do people order the most?", she asks. Naturally, the answer is pizza.

For the first time, I feel like the other drivers. They often talk on the phone too. That's how they spend time with their families when the long hours don't allow them to be physically present. For many their families may actually be thousands of kilometers away. Here they earn money for those who haven't been able to emigrate in search of a better life.

When I arrive to grab an order from the restaurant pick-up window, I overhear two couriers talking while waiting for their orders. One is complaining about being tired although he started only three hours ago, the other one is glad that he got a free hamburger from some place. That happens sometimes. I don't have time to talk with them because my order is ready and I have to head off. I wave and mutter a 'see you later'.

Then I make my first blunder. A customer has ordered a pepperoni pizza and a large diet coke. I routinely pack the pizza box on the top shelf of my thermos backpack and the bagged soda bottle on the bottom shelf. I check the destination which happens to be the neighboring block in my apartment building. I guess that distracted me. Or I just wasn't focused enough because I was talking with a friend on the phone but nevertheless, I forget the soda in my backpack and only notice it by the time I've reached the next address.

Elsewhere the customer is now eating their salty pizza without a drink. Because I've already marked the order as 'delivered', I can't access the information again to call the customer and apologize. My stomach turns. What do I do with the drink? I don't have the nerve to deliver it now because it's my home building and I'm afraid that the neighbors would notice, and it would be too late anyway; the pizza is already eaten or the customer has gone to the store to get some soda. In any case, I've ruined their night. If that happened to me, I would write a message to customer service and I would be refunded in *tokens*. One can use them to get discounts on future orders. Because I don't feel like keeping the bottle to myself, I decide that one person's misfortune is another person's fortune. I leave the drink to a customer that ordered a pizza without a drink.

The world doesn't end because of one soda bottle. Customer service doesn't contact me. If instead the whole order would have gone to the wrong address, I would have lost my fee.

The "Courier Partner Service Agreement" states: *The Courier Partner is responsible for Delivery Services being performed professionally, efficiently and in compliance with any applicable laws, regulations (e.g. traffic safety rules), this Agreement and/or specific guidelines such as the Food Safety Guidelines (Appendix 1).*

Wolt is entitled to make deductions from the Courier Partner's remuneration if the Delivery Services are not performed (a) professionally and/or in accordance with this Agreement; (b) in a reasonable time without jeopardizing food safety or (c) the Delivery Services result in complaints from the users of the Platform. The amount of the deduction may not exceed the amount of compensation paid by Wolt.

At half past nine the phone quiets down. Several restaurants close their doors, it's starting to drizzle as well. Tomorrow, I have a day off.

Ahmed Fayek, 34 years old, Tunisian, lives in Jyväskylä:

"Last time I took a day off in January. Since that, I haven't been able to rest for a minute. I work 12 hours a day, sometimes even more. Mainly I drive for Wolt, occasionally I have overlapping shifts with Foodora as well. Yesterday, I was behind the wheel from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. and made 150 euros. At the lousiest, I've only made 50 euros from a ten-hour day. When you deduct the gas expenses, insurances and taxes, you only end up with a couple of euros per hour.

When I came to Finland five years ago for my master's degree, I was told that the job situation here was good. Just come down and you'll get a job and blah blah blah. Well, that really wasn't the case. I've sent thousands of job applications, and only a fraction of them have I even gotten a response back from. Nonetheless I had to get by alongside my studies somehow so I started working as a cleaner before my friend suggested applying for a food courier.

At first, the work was pleasant and I made decent money. Not anymore. Over the last two years, things have changed. The fee system has updated itself so that an order that used to be valued at 10 euros may nowadays be only five euros. That means that whereas before I only had to work for four or five hours at a time, now the workload to earn that same amount of money has doubled. Sometimes I've even received orders that are worth only three euros. At the same time, living expenses have become more expensive, gas prices have also gone up by almost half. Say I wanted to have leave from work next week, I'd had to work twice as hard now but on current fees it isn't even possible. And imagine going into the store and all the prices have gone up and yet your own pay has been cut. It's terrible.

Two days ago I got a phone call from Wolt. A restaurant had forgotten to give me half of an order so I was asked if I could come back to get it. I said that I was sorry but I couldn't. A couple of years ago, I would have gladly gone back and wouldn't have even bothered to ask for compensation. Why? Because I truly liked Wolt, I admired the company. But now it has become clear that they only care about themselves. So why would I care about them and sacrifice my time to circle back from halfway when they don't even offer to reimburse me for it?

I also think it's weird that Wolt is constantly recruiting more drivers even when the

demand is low. There's also been a big shift in accessibility. Communication used to be quicker and easier. Nowadays, we're instructed to approach by email and getting a response may take up to a week.

I have a family that I don't get to spend time with because I'm working around the clock. My wife spends time with me by coming with me to work. Picture that: we do everything in this car, eat, talk, be with each other. But this too changed a few weeks ago when the app notified me that you're not supposed to have passengers due to the privacy of our customers. That's hogwash. It's not like someone is just giving a ride to their drunken friends. But let's say you had to talk to your friend about something extremely important, only you don't have the time for it because the company doesn't give you any time, and now they're even taking away the slightest chance to do so.

Now I work so much that I can have days off once in a while and focus on my doctorate studies. Isn't it ridiculous that I have a university degree and this is the only job I'm good enough for? And I'm not the only one. Many of my acquaintances are in the same position. Why aren't we treated as human beings, where are our rights? If economic growth is what these people want, then you have to look after everybody who is participating in the economy. Instead, Finnish people just call us parasites. I also have to deal with racism in my work. That has also increased in the last five years. Especially restaurants treat us drivers really poorly. Instead of politely telling us that the order isn't ready yet, they may hurl insults at us.

Still, I'm not afraid. I'm a religious person. I know that God won't leave me. I work hard and whatever happens, happens. And when I eventually have enough time to finish my studies, I'm definitely going to leave this country." (Wolt denies constantly recruiting new drivers and maintains that they're making sure that the billing rate of their drivers stays reasonable. According to Wolt, fees haven't been cut, instead they have been elevated since 2017.)

March 20th. I've been splashed with mud up to my chest, my bicycle doesn't have fenders. The weather app on my phone tells me that visibility is at 800 meters, humidity at hundred percent. A chill that bites into your forehead soon turns into rain.

Inside the Chinese restaurant no one greets me, they barely even glance at me. A boy who looks to be about ten years old brings me my order. He actually looks at me like I'm a human being.

Attitudes towards food couriers vary from one restaurant to the next. Some restaurants have been considerate enough towards the drivers to set up an own table for them or at least a waiting chair, perhaps even glasses of water. Most restaurants are tired of the drivers. Subway has given feedback on loitering couriers and they forbid drivers coming in without orders to pick up. McDonald's has the same policy: don't come in until the order is marked as ready. At the McDonald's in Hakaniemi, drivers take their orders from the outlet outside, rain or shine.

At a popular pizza place in Kallio, the employees don't even look at the couriers. I wait for my order but they don't bring it to me, they leave it on a bench two meters away, avoiding eye contact.

March 21st. I bike to the front of Autotalo at Kamppi, the “coffee room” of food couriers. It’s a place for waiting for the next gig and to chat with the other drivers. The location has been chosen for practical reasons. McDonald’s at this building is one of the most popular restaurants, and nearby are other places that also supply a lot of deliveries. One of them is Wolt Market.

This is a so-called “dark store”, a retail store that isn’t open to the public but instead operates entirely online. The company delivers groceries from Wolt Market, mostly impulse purchases. I once delivered six liters of lemonade and a glass jar of pickles from there. Wolt is perceived as a food delivery company but in Helsinki, a fifth of the deliveries are something other than meals. In addition to restaurants, among the other co-operators with Wolt include places like pharmacies, electronics stores, and sex shops.

Today, there are three drivers in front of Autotalo solving a malfunction in an electric scooter. One of the men is lying on the ground and inspecting the vehicle with a flashlight. Another electric scooter near us starts beeping its alarm sound, and an older lady comes to complain about it.

“Terrible ruckus, night and day.”

I say hi in English to two other drivers on bicycles.

“How’s it going? Pretty quiet, huh?”

“Only eight orders today”, a 40-year-old Afghan Ali responds.

He’s worrying about where he could find a refrigerator-freezer unit either for free or for a bargain to replace his broken one. He has six children to feed at home.

A 30-year-old Tunisian Osman has another kind of problem. He has borrowed an electric bicycle from a friend but the battery was stolen during a food delivery. Osman asks if I can help with his insurance matters. He shows me the insurance company app, and together we fill out the accident report.

“Thanks, bro”, he says in Finnish.

Osman has worked as a Wolt courier for six years, although not always full-time, sometimes just in addition to his studies. When I tell him I just started, he shakes his head.

“Wolt isn’t like it used to be, you’d make better money being a thief... But there are no options, you gotta scrape the money for food and rent somehow.”

He informs me on a Facebook group where plans of a strike are underway. It’s meant to occur on the following Saturday. The demands of the drivers are related to the new fee model.

An appendix to the new “Courier Partner Service Agreement” states:

The new fee takes better into account the actual effort required for any given delivery task to be completed. This includes, for example, distance, weather conditions, the size of delivery, the location of the merchant and the time of day. These elements will affect all Courier Partners in an equal manner. Due to the changing nature of these elements taken into account, Courier Partner will not be notified about the specific parameters and/or the changes in the parameters affecting the fee offered - - - Wolt is obliged to take into account the rare possibility of a technical error, which could result in the Courier Partner Application offering a fee that is clearly outside the limits that could be considered normal for the particular delivery task. Because of this possibility, Wolt will not be bound by clearly erroneous fees offered through the Courier Partner Application and shown in advance, if (a) the fee offered is greater than 20 euro or (b) Courier Partner should in any case understand that the fee offered cannot be correct.

In the old fee model, four euros was the base payment for a weekday delivery, five

euros on weekends. Now fees can remain under four euros regardless of the day. Wolt has the right to change their contract and delivery fees by notifying the Courier Partner seven days in advance. Drivers wish that the contract would determine a five-euro minimum fee plus a delivery extra based on every kilometer that extends beyond one kilometer.

We are the backbone of this company, we must stand together and get our voices heard, says a writing in the group.

People on the top keep getting richer, workers on the bottom get poorer. To all my courier colleagues and comrades: we must unite and end this slavery.

Although there have been multiple demonstrations over the years, they haven't moved Wolt in any direction.

Wolt Enterprises Oy was founded in October of 2014. The founders were six young men: Miki Kuusi, Juhani Mykkänen, Elias Aalto, Mika Matikainen, Oskari Pétas and Lauri Andler. The men got big investors to join them, such as Ilkka Paananen of Supercell and Risto Siilasmaa, then-chairman of the board of Nokia. The original idea was a mobile app that you could use to order a restaurant dish in advance and then go pick it up past the queue.

Home deliveries began in the spring of 2015 but one could only get them if the restaurant had its own courier for it. But by next autumn Wolt already started recruiting drivers of their own. They were contractual employees of Wolt and they were paid an hourly wage. Soon it turned out that Wolt had neglected to pay the elevated Sunday pay as well as payments to social security and pension insurance. After the controversy, the company quickly shifted to the current model, commission contracts. Food couriers became freelancers and entrepreneurs.

Restaurants collaborating with the app increased at a steady pace and in 2017 Wolt spread abroad. Today it operates in 25 countries. The farthest of them are Kazakhstan and Japan.

The company has over 150 000 couriers, and roughly 8 000 people work on a monthly or hourly wage in administrative or IT-related tasks.

In 2021, Wolt was sold to DoorDash, an American company. The price for the sale was over seven billion euros. This acquisition was a huge news story in Finland and it was celebrated like a win in the Eurovision: congratulations came flooding in from ministers to reporters. Moods were ecstatic, the boys of Finland are taking over the world! The papers reported that the biggest private owners of the company could stand to make even tens of millions of euros from the purchase.

The purchase price was tied to DoorDash's stock price and in March of 2022, the stock value plummeted. Concurrently Wolt's selling price dropped by more than half to 2.8 billion euros. Founders and other major owners lost a lion's share from their portfolios.

After the acquisition, Miki Kuusi continued as Wolt's CEO and is now in charge of DoorDash operations outside the United States. In 2021, his taxable income was 12.8 million euros, of which 280 000 euros came in the form of wage income. In the two preceding years, Kuusi earned more than two million euros. In 2019, a food courier working in Finland billed 13.44 euros per hour on average.

The question about food couriers' terms of employment is yet to be solved. Wolt had been debating this matter for years with both the couriers as well as occupational safety and health officials. The company sees the couriers as independent entrepreneurs who have freedom to do the job in the way they see fit. But it's not as simple as that. Wolt drivers have less freedom in their work than normal entrepreneurs. They have no control of their pricing, the

algorithm monitors their work performance and determines when and where it's worthwhile to work. Wolt assigns them the responsibilities of a worker but makes them carry the risks of an entrepreneur. Pension doesn't build up, nor does the condition of employment. Therefore, couriers are left outside of unemployment benefits and they have no rights for sick or annual leaves. Naturally, the company saves a remarkable amount of money with this strategy.

According to Wolt, couriers are entrepreneurs precisely because they don't have the typical responsibilities of an employee. For example, they don't have to come to work or use the equipment assigned by the employer. They can also decline assignments offered by the algorithm and work for Wolt's competitors. Tax authorities and the administrative court, for instance, agree with Wolt's assessment that couriers are entrepreneurs. Some of the couriers complain that the job doesn't add up to pension or sick per diem but Wolt notes that their pension- and sick leave security are formed through the statutory practice of entrepreneur's pension insurance. For a courier that earns 2 000 euros per month, the YEL (Self-employed Persons' Pension Act)payment is slightly under 400 euros per month but most neglect to pay it or pay less. Wolt offers accident and liability insurance for the couriers.

In November of 2021, Southern Finland's Regional State Administrative Agency issued a verdict that Wolt drivers are employees of Wolt and therefore the company should obey the working time law.

Wolt has appealed this to the administrative court where the case is still awaiting to be processed.

The status of platform workers has been debated at length in different bodies within the EU as well. The European Commission gave its suggestion on a directive on the matter in 2021 but member countries have had disagreements over it, and the directive has yet to be addressed in the European Parliament. Two days before the publication of this text, news broke of the EU countries having approved a shared stance. According to it, platform workers would be considered employees of the company if at least three of the following criteria are met:

1. The company determines upper limits on the amount of money workers can receive.
2. The company requires that the worker on duty must comply by rules that pertain to their appearance, conduct and work performance.
3. The company monitors the work, including electronic devices.
4. The company limits the worker's freedom to pick their working hours and stints of absence.
5. The company has restrictions on the workers' ability to turn down work assignments.
6. The company limits the worker's freedom to utilize subcontractors or substitutes.
7. The company limits the worker's prospects of acquiring their own customer base or of working for third parties.

Wolt meets the three first criteria. Therefore, this conclusion puts forth that Wolt drivers should be considered employees of the company.

Of course, Wolt isn't the only company that this dispute concerns. The European Commission estimates that approximately 5.5 million of the platform workers in EU countries are in fact employees even though they are treated as entrepreneurs.

Some countries have intervened firmly to the problems concerning platform economy. For instance, Uber isn't allowed to operate in France. Foodora pulled out of Australia

when contractual employment was made mandatory. In Norway, couriers went on strike and were able to negotiate collective labor agreements for themselves.

Wolt argues for their entrepreneurial model on the basis that the couriers themselves vouch for it. According to a poll conducted by Taloustutkimus (a market research company) in the spring of 2021, more than half of the drivers value their entrepreneurial freedom and don't therefore wish to become a traditional employee. However, only 42 percent of the drivers took the poll. Wolt is currently conducting a new poll about the views of their drivers. But Osman and Ali, who I met at the front of Autotalo, haven't taken it. They say that they haven't had the time. We exchange a few last words before our apps ring again to notify about our next deliveries. My order from the Wolt Market is ready to be picked up.

I have to take a leak. The Market has bathrooms but drivers aren't allowed to use them. Wolt couriers have never had staff spaces. Foodora had one for a while before it was withdrawn.

Honza Roner Prochazka, 39 years old, Czech, lives in Helsinki:

"I was taking a delivery to a customer who I'd already delivered to before. I had to pee really bad so I asked if I could use his bathroom. He banged the door shut and gave feedback to Wolt after which customer service called me, and I was given a warning.

When I was working for Foodora in Tampere, I was laid off because I showed up late to my shift. I had accidentally set my time zone to Prague instead of Helsinki. The reason wasn't good enough to my boss. They just said that your freelance contract is over. *Bye bye*. That was that. All for being thirty minutes late.

I even did a bit of PR for Wolt. They wanted me in their commercials because I looked good. I performed in some clips for social media. A highly paid video crew shot me and I got a small reward, about 12 euros per hour that was paid by adding imaginary kilometers into the app.

Soon after Kela (The Social Insurance Institution) started sending me messages with the assumption that I was an entrepreneur. I told them that I am not, you can check my tax information, I've never gone over the income limit! But they cut off my unemployment benefits anyway. It took eight months to prove to Kela that I really was unemployed. It made me very depressed and suicidal.

It wasn't the first time. I was born into a middle-class family in Prague but the recession of the 90s took us to the bottom. After high school, I managed to get into university to study history, I was interested in the subject and still am. I like reading but because of my ADHD, I didn't do well in my studies. My attention deficit was diagnosed early in childhood but my Czech papers weren't trusted in Finland. I had to be diagnosed again and go through that whole taxing process again to get some support and medicine. Mental health care for foreigners in Finland is nonexistent.

Despite everything I've tried to get a hold on my life. I went to study tourism in the Tampere University of Applied Sciences, found a partner and had a baby with her.

After we moved from Tampere to Helsinki, my girlfriend broke up with me. Here I've been studying in culinary school but I faced discrimination in work practice. I also met a new

love and had another child. Unfortunately, we broke up as well. This spring, my father who's in ill health moved to Finland to live with me. We share the apartment between the two of us. The kids are with me every other week. Because I can't provide for them and my father on Kela benefits alone, I try to find a rentable Wolt user profile and ask the renter to pay me in cash.

I dream that in the future I could work as a personal trainer. Going to the gym has literally saved my life. Because I stay physically active, I don't think about my depression constantly. I've also made friends in the foreigners' rugby team. I don't have any Finnish friends."

March 23rd. Through a recent update you can now decline an order with the push of a button. In the beginning of the year, that option wasn't available. If you didn't want to take the order, you just had to wait and let the ringing go on until the algorithm let go of it automatically. The other option was to ask courier support to remove the order. The new update is good. It saves time and furthermore the driver can now use their declining to express frankly that they won't take on deliveries that, for example, are only worth a particular amount of money.

Today the orders keep ringing but they vanish from the screen before I can accept them. For some reason, I lose three gigs in a short amount of time. I wonder if there's something wrong with the app.

The "Courier Partner Service Agreement" declares:

Wolt observes the care of a prudent service provider, but the Platform may be temporarily unavailable for scheduled or unscheduled maintenance, either by Wolt or by third-party providers, or because of reasons beyond the control of Wolt. Wolt Platform is provided on an "as is" and "as available" basis and Wolt does not warrant that the Platform will be uninterrupted, timely, secure, or error-free.

The day is quiet. Perhaps the sun has lured people out of their caves. But now I have an order to deliver, and the portion should be ready by now.

"This says it isn't ready", the clerk tells me.

"Well my app says it is ready", I insist.

On the other hand, I don't mind the wait because there are barely any orders. In the quietest stretches it can take more than a couple of hours before anything happens. That's when time flies but the pay stays behind. The latest payday was a week ago on Thursday, that's statistically when there's the least drivers to go around because many are taking the day off.

"Now everyone's out of money again and back to work", an Indian colleague notes sarcastically while waiting for his order.

I've driven 11 deliveries in six hours and earned about 60 euros. That's weaker than last week. I'm disappointed.

With these order amounts one would have to work almost around the clock. That's what many of the drivers I've met do, work from morning until evening, from ten to fourteen hours a day. And still they scrape by on income that is way smaller than the average pay in Finland.

This isn't exactly the picture that the media has given on Wolt.

Articles have foregrounded individual drivers that are doing very well for themselves. Several Finnish media outlets have interviewed Timur Fearless who makes TikTok

videos of his deliveries. He performs challenges where the goal could be, for example, to earn 8 000 euros in one month. To reach that goal he had to work 16-hour days on every day of the month. Timur dreams of buying a Tesla with his savings.

In the couriers' Facebook group Timur has gotten his share of criticism. Many slam him as a troll hired by Wolt to hold up a polished image of themselves. (Wolt denies hiring Timur Fearless or collaborating with him on his stunts.)

Hatred isn't only focused on Timur. Drivers fight with each other, not only on the same orders but sometimes literally. A video spread from the courier's Facebook group that was captured on Vaasankatu in Helsinki. In the short clip, two drivers with blue backpacks are having a fistfight in the middle of the intersection. The cause for the fight isn't apparent but the video is a good exemplification of the general spirit and culture in the Facebook group.

When I tried to find interviewees for this story through the group, I received plenty of hostile comments.

DM for delivery job and sexual harassment

Unnecessary trouble !! don't wolt advertise food to your home door, black man deliver free 0€

March 24th.

Espresso House Hakaniemi, 10:13 a.m. Delivery fee 4.73 € (incl. 1.88 km transit).

Sapore Helsinki, klo 11:08 a.m. Delivery fee 4.46 € (incl. 1.22 km transit).

Holy Doner, 11:20 a.m. Delivery fee 4.47 € (incl. 0.94 km transit).

Wok and Noodle, 11:30 a.m. Delivery fee 4.24 € (incl. 0.76 km transit).

Napule Pizzeria Napoletana, 11:41 a.m. Delivery fee 4.42 € (incl. 1.27 km transit).

Friends & Brgrs Helsinki, 12:02 p.m. Delivery fee 5.26 € (incl. 2.57 km transit).

Biang! Citycenter, 12:16 p.m. Delivery fee 5.11 € (incl. 2.95 km transit).

Sushibar + Wine Freda, 12:53 p.m. Delivery fee 4.63 € (incl. 1.08 km transit).

Miss Tea Helsinki, 13:23 p.m. Delivery fee 5.45 € (incl. 2.24 km transit).

Via Tribunali Katajanokka, 13:35 p.m. Delivery fee 5.66 € (incl. 2.74 km transit).

Rioni Helsinki, 14:14 p.m. Delivery fee 5.20 € (incl. 1.98 km transit).

Burger King Mannerheimintie, 15:10 p.m. Delivery fee 4.61 € (incl. 1.24 km transit).

Dispatched deliveries: 13

Driven distance: 39 km

Estimated earnings: 62.86 €

March 25th. I arrive at the Wolt Market in Autotalo ten minutes before the agreed-upon starting point of the strike.

"Hey bro, go online. Everyone goes online now but declines every incoming order", one of the organizers instructs everyone who shows up.

So the ringing of delivery notifications keeps building. There's approximately 40 of us waiting for and declining orders. We compile our blue backpacks into a pyramid-shaped pile.

Media representatives arrive on the spot, and I too end up in a news photograph on Yleisradio (Finland's national public broadcasting company).

"Today we are truly together here!" someone shouts.

Drivers participating in the strike are worried that the already lowered fees will decrease more than they already have. The problem lies particularly in long distance deliveries: according to couriers, the time spent on delivery doesn't match the fee. Whereas before long distances could earn one even 15 euros, now the fees are at best around 10 euros. Not to mention that drivers with cars have to pay for gas that conversely has gone up in price.

"We must not give up! From this point on, we will no longer accept long, more than two-kilometer deliveries that pay less than five euros", one driver agitates.

Many people wish for a new agreement to replace the current agreement that leaves the question of fees open-ended. The agreement that came into effect in March mentions that Wolt will "occasionally update" its delivery fees.

At least they will occasionally pay bonuses of which the app will notify from time to time. It can, for example, offer a 12-euro bonus for every driver that is able to complete 12 gigs within four hours.

When the demonstration has lasted for about half an hour, Wolt Market closes its doors. The drivers cheer. One scab tries to enter the store but is stopped by others.

But by the evening of the very same day, I already see several drivers on the job. It's clearly difficult to get organized when the people are forced to compete against each other. You'll always find someone who will pedal your pizza for pennies.

Couriers abroad have however been able to stand up for their rights. In Italy, couriers have founded their own trade unions, and one delivery firm algorithm was ruled discriminatory by the court when it prioritized top couriers for work shifts and didn't take the reasons for absences, such as ill health, into account.

Concurrently, courier rights have also been objected to in Italy. The right-wing populist Five Star Movement has supported the initiative by platform companies to fend off regulations.

In turn, The Barcelona-based Riders X Derechos constituted a crowdfunding campaign and created the Mensakas cooperative wherein the couriers have contracts of employment. The coop has scribed its goal to be an example on how to fight against "artificial entrepreneurship." Mensakas has its own app from where the customers order their food.

In Finland, the rights of couriers have most notably been advocated for by Justice4Couriers. The group was founded in September of 2018 as a counter response to one-sided fee cuts by Wolt and Foodora. When the companies refused to negotiate with couriers, the group started a campaign where consumers were urged to boycott courier services. A meme spread online where consumers were encouraged to give Wolt and Foodora one-star reviews. Currently the group isn't active apart from occasional blog posts.

March 27th.

"Don't yank that door", a yellow vest grunts at me.

This is one of those prosperous condominiums in South Helsinki that still has its

own caretaker. He has plenty on his plate today. It has snowed tens of centimeters. The snowstorm keeps getting worse, and the orders keep piling in unison with the drizzle. People have stayed home, maybe even many of my driver colleagues. The Meteorological Institute has assessed driving conditions as “very bad”, the rain is “icy”. Water drops in my eyeglasses makes biking difficult, my head feels like it’s freezing over.

I’m forced to ride on car lanes because the bike lanes haven’t been plowed. But cars aren’t paying any attention to me, I almost get run over and only receive aggressive honking on top of that. Well, at least three customers are considerate to the poor bastard slaving away in the blizzard and tip me a couple of dimes.

When I dismount my bike by evening, my feet can barely hold me up, and I have no feeling in my toes. Hurts like hell.

March 28th.

At the end of my workday, I meet Kryštof at my workroom in Suvilahti. He chuckles when he sees me in my work clothes.

“I probably stink of sweat, I didn’t get a chance to shower at home”, I’m already defending myself.

Kryštof draws attention to the printed photographs on the wall, small 10-cm prints. Kryštof at work as a food courier, Kryštof at work as a sculptor, Kryštof in the shower, sleeping, doing laundry, watching television. Once he suggested that I take a photo of his daily ritual of nasal irrigation. When you can’t afford to be sick, it’s best to use preemptive measures.

“I was sick again last week and it was actually pretty pleasant. I got to *be sick*. When I was dependent on Wolt, you couldn’t actually rest when you were sick, instead you had to push yourself back to work as soon as possible so you wouldn’t lose your pay. Now I got to spend several days without doing anything, recovering in peace”, Kryštof says.

Kryštof tells me that before he got sick, he went to see some of his friends that live in Riga. His mother also came to visit Kryštof’s temporary apartment in Suomenlinna. (Before that he lived in his artist studio.) Unleashed from his Wolt job, Kryštof has had the time to focus on his art. He has applied for grants, worked on his portfolio and began making a new piece.

I tell him about the demonstration last weekend and show my torn backpack. We talk about shame and about how people react to food couriers.

“It feels weird to already be feeling bad about the fact that you aren’t getting paid enough and on top of that, regular people in the streets are pissed off at you. Have you faced something like that?” Kryštof asks.

“Yeah, and I feel like often when people look at food couriers, they pity them.”

The shame extends from drivers to customers. Once a buddy of mine pretended not to notice me in the street – and I did the same. I think I’m projecting my own pitying thoughts onto the shame. *Poor soul has to work a job like that*. I’m ashamed of people looking at me and thinking: he must be poor, pedaling away just to get by somehow.

When the coronavirus pandemic came along, the company introduced contactless deliveries where the courier leaves the order behind the door, rings the doorbell and leaves. Some of the customers might meet you at the door but most of them make sure to open the

door after they've already heard the courier enter the elevator. I find myself acting the same: it would be too shameful to meet someone's gaze. Some people foresee this because the app makes it possible to leave instructions to the drivers. Useful information would be to, for example, inform of the floor that the apartment is in. One customer writes: Drop off by the door, LEAVE, thanks :)

At the end of our meeting, I count the money with Kryštof. The billing frequency is set at two weeks which means that my first billing covers my work compensation from the latter half of March working as Kryštof's substitute. He hasn't actually sent an invoice to the company, instead Wolt bills itself through an invoicing service, and the invoicing service accounts the net wage to Kryštof. (The other option would be to make an invoice through your own company in which case the driver would be obliged to pay the value-added tax, among other added responsibilities.)

I've worked for ten days and earned a gross of 701.62 euros and 28 euros in tips. When taxes and the commission for the invoicing service is deducted, Kryštof is left with 630.98 euros. Out of that sum, he is obliged to pay for his entrepreneur's pension insurance. Right now, Kryštof pays a lowered minimum YEL payment, 135 euros per month. A courier working with a bicycle doesn't face other expenses, Kryštof knows how to maintain his bicycle himself. A courier working with a car has to take their net wage and still pay for gas as well as motor vehicle tax and car insurance. Some couriers make monthly deals on electric scooters that from time to time show up for sale in the couriers' Facebook group. The prices hover somewhere below or over thousand euros.

March 29th. I ring the doorbell at a square in Lintulahti. The door opens right away and I don't even get back in the elevator before I'm already yelled at.

"Hey hey hey, wait a minute! I'm not gonna start cleaning up the first thing I get this, this thing tipped over again! You hear me, I'm not cleaning up after this", a young man rants and leaves the trash in the hallway.

The fault isn't mine but McDonald's'. They've filled up the lemonade to flow over and the paper bags tear easily. The young man seems like the aggressive type and looks like it too. The corner of his eye is stitched up. Of course, it could have come from something other than fighting. But I don't stay behind to find out, instead I quickly get inside the elevator. I head back downtown because someone has ordered face cream from Stockmann's Crazy Days.

In the afternoon, I fall on my bike because I'm tired and lost in thought. The tire hits a frosty crack and I fly over the handlebar. I have pain in my rib cage. I schedule a doctor's appointment at a private clinic because the work accident insurance included in my artist's grant enables it. Without the grant, I'd be in queue at the emergency ward. The doctor probes my rib cage and sides, he finds the sensitive spot. Diagnosis: fractured rib. Just a hairline fracture – luckily – but medical imaging doesn't help nor does anything else. I just have to stuff myself with strong painkillers.

April 2nd. I'm on sick leave, or in other words, I'm lying at home and typing this story. For an actual Wolt driver, a situation like this could lead to an unbearable spiral. I don't know if my colleague Osman, whose battery was stolen, ever got paid for his damages from the insurance company. Another Wolt driver that I've met, Somalian Dawalee, told me that someone crashed his car when he was making a delivery. It cost more than a thousand euros to fix his car and he couldn't work for a week. All Wolt did was express their regrets for the situation. *No can do*.

The situation is reminiscent of the Ken Loach film *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), a sharp depiction of platform economy. The film's main character, head of the family, Ricky has lost his job due to the financial crisis and has since taken on a variety of temp jobs. When the opportunity arises to work as a delivery driver, Ricky decides to try his luck. The job is marketed as a well-paid gig with the freedom of an entrepreneur. Very soon it is revealed that the working conditions and working hours are inhuman. There's no time to use a restroom, you have to pee into a jar behind the wheel. Finally, Ricky is robbed and beaten during a delivery. When Ricky is lying in hospital, the delivery company calls him and demands him a thousand-pound compensation for a barcode scanner that was taken in the robbery.

The University of Tampere just recently released a report called *Occupational Safety and Health Risks amongst Food Delivery Workers*. It states that couriers are suffering from both mental and physical exhaustion. The problems are brought about by algorithmic management, uncertain nature of the job, long working hours, poor career prospects, lack of work community and illusion of flexibility and independence.

The time pressure and the competitive setting forces couriers to rush and break traffic rules. Indeed, couriers have a higher-than-average risk of getting into car accidents. They have died in car crashes, although not in Finland.

The drivers who responded to the study in Tampere emphasized that they want to be responsible but some admitted that they try to earn more money by breaking rules, adding to the risk of accidents occurring. I've run through a red light myself.

The accident risk is enhanced by the fact that meal breaks are often left not kept. The platform doesn't tell you to keep one, instead it pumps up new orders at you.

"You don't have time to take a meal break. You drive a car and if your blood sugar goes too low, it's a bad thing", one person interviewed for the report tells.

According to the University of Tampere report, many food couriers find loneliness and being ordered around by the algorithm to be draining factors in the job. Drivers perform their job under strict surveillance. They're monitored more rigorously than traditional employees: the drivers' locations are constantly followed, and one of the platform companies, Foodora is known to have a scoring system where the algorithm divides "good" drivers from "bad" ones.

In this, Foodora and Wolt differ from each other. Wolt's algorithmic surveillance is lighter from Foodora. Based on the report interviews, drivers working for Wolt don't find the algorithm-based management to cause particular burden. In contrast, Foodora functions in a manner where the drivers of the highest category get to reserve the best work shifts first.

The scoring is affected by commitment and performance: the more, the faster and the more efficiently the couriers work, the higher they rise. Minus points are given, for example, if one "is late" from their shift, i.e. they log themselves late into the app. Likewise, canceling a shift for a sick leave can lead to the worker to go down in their scoring – in the worst-case scenario they can be fired.

I've seen an email sent by Foodora where the driver was informed of being laid off.

The reason stated were:

- You didn't arrive to your shift
- You didn't work the full shift
- You arrived late to your shift (late logging in)
- You accept fewer orders than others in your city on average
- You're often on break. More often than others in your city on average

Much isn't known about the surveillance performed by the algorithms because the algorithms aren't transparent. Neither is there an existing statute that would oblige companies to inform their workers how and on what grounds the orders are assigned, and how the gathered information affects their future work opportunities.

This much is known: the scores and feedback given by customers do have importance but Wolt doesn't display the customer scores to the drivers themselves. At times, the management will however share them through the app.

In January, Kryštof received two five-star feedbacks where he was commended for being professional and polite. The second feedback ended in the words: *A smiley face doesn't even cover my experience. At least 6/5. Truly thank you for an excellent job. I can watch American football with a full slate of treats.*

Strangely enough, these feedbacks were given on days when Kryštof wasn't even working.

Tomi Aunio, 37 years, Finnish, lives in Turku:

"We drivers don't indeed get direct access to customer feedback. But on the street, you may come across situations where people complain to you that your car is in the wrong spot. People have spat on my car and kicked at its door. But these things are very rare when you take into account that altogether I've driven to 9 000 addresses, more than 40 000 kilometers, that could take me around the world!

I've been involved right from the beginning. On December 13, 2015, I met with Wolt representatives in a building near the Viking Line terminal. There was no orientation day or anything, I only got instructions on how the app works. At first, there was a separate piece of software for four different functions: for driving, for reserving shifts, for calling or messaging in chat and for logging into your shift. Now all of them are in one software developed by the company, only navigation is provided by Google.

At first, Turku had about twenty restaurants involved and approximately fifty drivers working. Now the numbers have multiplied. There are only two people left from the original gang, Waheed and I. I'm coming up on eight years. That's pretty cool when you consider how many start-up companies spring up and die right away. Wolt has remained and prospered. People don't stress that in the media, only the negative sides. Even if Americans now have the majority of the shares, the company itself is still domestic. There are the company colors too, blue and white, just like the Finnish flag.

Wolt provides us with jackets, hats and backpacks but so far they haven't launched trousers. I went ahead and made ones myself, they have the Wolt logo plus the emblem for my own firm Pikakuljetus Tomi Aunio. When you're covered from head to toe in blue

clothes, people know right away that he's on that business, he's that guy. I also made a plaque for my car, I strive to keep it clean and shiny as it is, it presents a good image to the customer as well.

I do this part-time. I drive about ten hours a week, on Fridays and Sundays. My main job as a librarian provides me with okay income but if I have the opportunity to make some more, then why not. I love driving. It's also a good counterbalance to my main job where I have to interact with people. When I'm driving, I get to be myself.

It's unlikely that any library customer knows that I also have this blue jacket. Or some people probably know, it's a really small city. I have rung my workmate's doorbell and that's always a funny situation, like what are you doing here. But this is a good job. If I was ashamed of it, I wouldn't be doing it.

My goal is to stay working for Wolt. Even if I had an even better main job, I don't think I would hang up my blue jacket. I like going to work. Like on Fridays, I get off from the library, just change my gear, go straight online and start driving. I come home at, say, 11 p.m. and I feel like I've really given my all and made some money.

It's pretty rare to spend a day driving and walk away with your shirt and boxers bone-dry. There's always climbing up and down stairs and walking and... god knows what. And we have drivers that have driven 15 hours every day for a year, the breaking point comes sooner or later. No one can endure that. You can maintain that for a while but then you get into an accident or lose your health.

It's tough that there isn't a law on working hours but on one hand, it's kind of cool that I don't have to report anywhere afterwards that hey I just drove 20 gigs on Friday. I did that on top of a full workday, that's a mighty achievement. I know that some of the drivers want to remain entrepreneurs. But when this is just part-time for me, I would do it even if I was contractually employed. And sure, it would be good if all the guys had the same fixed wages."

April 7th. Good Friday. Wolt has sent an in-app notification that says demand may be quieter today. That's true: whereas the quietness of the Holy Week means God's silence to Christians, to food couriers this means silence of the app. The Christian prays with the knowledge that God will not answer. The food courier waits for an order outside the restaurant with the knowledge that the algorithm remains silent.

Luckily, I have other things to do. Last week, I designed and ordered stickers that I can stick on portions going to the customers. I only get to stick a few stickers before I get a call from Wolt.

"Jimmy here from the delivery team, hi, we have received feedback related to an order you delivered earlier today. Do you remember anything particular, Royal Nepal a couple of hours ago?"

"Umm, I don't recall anything special. How so?"

"There was a sticker on the order."

"Sticker? What sticker?"

"Well.. It said *Thank you for supporting modern slavery*. Did you stick it on there?"

I chuckle.

“What’s funny?”

“Well, *funny because it’s true*. But no, I didn’t stick it on there.”

“Okay... You didn’t?”

“No.”

“All right then, thanks, I’m going to forward this to operational management for further investigation.”

The call ends and my stomach turns. I just lied. Maybe because I took pleasure in the situation. On the other hand, I was scared.

Beforehand, I had had a conversation with two lawyers about the stickers. The lawyer of the Artists’ Association commended my idea for being inventive and for having good intentions but couldn’t recommend sticking them on orders due to potential legal consequences. The biggest risks had to do with the probability of them dismissing Kryštof’s contract. He himself accepted the risk.

My other lawyer had warned me that Wolt isn’t just some start-up anymore but rather an American corporation: the game could get rough. Then again, he pointed out that in the Finnish legal system they would have to prove their losses down to the euro, and the proceeding publicity from that wouldn’t benefit Wolt. Therefore, they most likely wouldn’t fight this in court. I hadn’t expected such a quick reaction. I had thought that the stickers would pop up on social media, and that’s how Wolt would find out.

My motive for this kind of sticker activism naturally stems from the poor work conditions of couriers. On top of that, I knew that the weakened fees were only the tip of the iceberg. Already last autumn, I had noticed activity in the couriers’ Facebook group where people were either offering courier accounts for rent or looking for rentable accounts. Usually, division between profits was split 50-50, but in some cases, the renter said they’d be taking up to 80 percent. Other drivers’ accounts are rented particularly by those people who don’t have any other opportunities to work.

Often they are so-called paperless people. Immigrants arriving from outside of the EU often have to wait a long time for their work permits. At that point, the temptation to moonlight for someone skimming off the top is big. These self-employed people on temporary residence permits also lack the legal capacity related to the nation’s labor laws, thus excluding them from being eligible for social security.

Inadequacies related to the work permits increase stress on drivers. Foodora has distributed work shifts based on residence permits. Couriers on temporary permits, students for example, have been able to reserve shifts at a maximum of 25 hours per week. At the same time, the people who have permanent residence permits have gotten shifts consisting of 40 hours a week, in accordance with the immigration law.

If a person has a temporary residence permit and it threatens to expire, they have to prove to authorities that they are employed. For food couriers, the situation is tricky. The service agreement isn’t a contract of employment, and the immigration law doesn’t have its own residence permit for a freelancer or a light entrepreneur. Self-employed sole traders have to establish that their income is at least 1 331 euros per month to be able to renew their permits. (According to newspapers, this limit is supposed to rise during the current government reign.)

Wolt intends to prevent this undeclared renting activity through the official process of substituting. That is how I became Kryštof’s substitute. By going through the process, the courier commits to follow a variety of rules like never asking for the route from a by-passer

because that may breach the customer's protection of privacy.

For all intents and purposes, there's no difference to someone performing "illegal" deliveries. Whether you're illegal or legal, the work conditions remain poor.

Moreover, moonlight substituting has its own risks. Let's imagine that I had rented my account from Kryštof without knowing him. The whole time I'm working through Kryštof's app in his name. When I message the support, the Wolt employees call me Kryštof. The fees also go straight to Kryštof and he delivers it to me. What if we didn't know each other and he would skip paying me? And which one of us is to pay for taxes and how?

April 10th.

Sivuraide, 12:06 p.m. Delivery fee 4.88 € (incl. 1.7 km transit).

Hanko Aasia RED1, 12:27 p.m. Delivery fee 5.18 € (incl. 2.03 km transit).

Picnic Sörnäinen, 12:56 p.m. Delivery fee 4.73 € (incl. 1.3 km transit).

Ravintola China Flavor, 13:02 p.m. Delivery fee 5.61 € (incl. 3.19 km transit).

Naughty BRGR / Sture, 13:35 p.m. Delivery fee 5.39 € (incl. 2.32 km transit).

McDonald's Helsinki Hakaniemi, 14:44 p.m. Delivery fee 4.19 € (incl. 0.59 km transit).

McDonald's Helsinki Hakaniemi, 14:44 p.m. Delivery fee 5.19 € (incl. 2.03 km transit).

Ristorante Momento Redi, 15:27 p.m. Delivery fee 5.41 € (incl. 2.98 km transit).

Sturen Express Pizzeria, 15:54 p.m. Delivery fee 4.07 € (incl. 0.2 km transit).

Subway Mäkelänkatu, 16:03 p.m. Delivery fee 4.14 € (incl. 0.44 km transit).

Via Tribunali Kallio, 16:27 p.m. Delivery fee 4.93 € (incl. 1.45 km transit).

Dispatched deliveries: 11

Driven distance: 36.9 km

Estimated earnings: 53.62 €

April 11th. I'm carrying three oven potatoes. A middle-aged man in a polo shirt meets me at the front door of an office complex.

"How many steps do you get in a day", he asks.

"Well, I move around with a bike, so", I mumble.

"Well, you must get some steps in, don't you have any kind of tracker?"

"I don't know about steps but I bike at least 50 kilometers a day."

"Good incidental exercise."

I thank him and take off. Then someone orders a frying pan as home delivery. I myself have sometimes thought of ordering a vacuum cleaner in the middle of the night from a 24/7 market.

My day's last pick-up from a restaurant is running nine minutes late. Some time ago I might have still gotten a small extra compensation for a similar situation. If the wait went past ten minutes, Wolt paid a compensation for waiting – two euros for every starting ten minutes – but now even that has been abandoned. In the Facebook group, one driver has shared screenshots from his app. The pictures establish that he has waited for a McDonald's order in the

middle of the night for over an hour, and has not received any extra compensation for it. The driver has threatened to leave the order there but a customer service person for courier support, who operates from Georgia, has persuaded him into delivering the order. Lastly, the customer service person has sent the driver a sticker that says “love” several times and includes a lot of red hearts.

April 13th. The pedal goes around the axle, I change the gear: first to a lighter gear for going uphill, *rattle rattle rattle*, I let it roll down on neutral, then *rattle rattle rattle* back to a bigger gear on a long straight road. I stop at the traffic light. Thirty seconds go by, I check my phone – no notifications. The light turns green, I cross the road, I signal with my hand that I’m turning right. There’s a bench on the side of the road. I stop my bike, set it on the kickstand, take off my backpack and helmet and sit down.

17:02 p.m.

I scroll my phone.

17:08 p.m.

I eat a sandwich, take a sip on my isotonic sports drink. I think back on the ice cream I ate yesterday. If platform workers get a collective labor agreement, food couriers must be granted a special right to have an ice cream break on a sunny day!

17:10 p.m.

17:11 p.m.

17:12 p.m.

Ring, ring. Accept order.

I ride to Pasila that’s about one kilometer away. There are four shopping bags waiting for me in the K-market refrigerator but they don’t fit in my backpack. I send a message to support and they advise me to leave half of the order for another courier to take care of. Even two of the bags weigh a ton.

After I’ve delivered the bags to Käpylä, I accept an order all the way from Metsälä. I know that it’s not profitable. After the delivery, I have to bike five kilometers back downtown because it’s no use staying back in the quiet surroundings of Metsälä to wait for the next gig. After the assignment, I notice that the payment for it is practically ridiculous. I message the Wolt support:

Me: *Hey! Really, only 4.94 euros for 4.41 km delivery?*

Mariam: *Thank you! I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.*

Couple of minutes go by and Mariam messages me again: *Hey Krystof! I’m very sorry about this inconvenience. Please send your questions about the payment to paymentsfinland@wolt.com. Thank you!!*

Mariam’s short messages have a bunch of blue hearts and other emojis. I don’t bother with sending the email.

April 14th. Last workday. To celebrate it, I've decided to earn more than a hundred euros. On current amounts of orders, that means drudging along for 12 hours. In that time, I deliver 24 orders and earn 122.88 euros, including tips.

My career as a slave for the platform economy is now over.

In a little more than four weeks, I worked for 19 days and delivered 259 orders. I accrued 753.5 bicycled kilometers, although the real number is higher – Wolt app only accounts for the active transits during picking up and delivering, not the transitions between orders.

I made a total gross income of 1 272.24 euros, a little over 11 euros per hour. That's only one euro more than the poverty line for one-person households, and less than what immigrants need to renew their residence permits.

At the same time, I've drawn out my monthly 2 500 euro grant and billed some hundreds from writing assignments that I've done nightly in addition to Wolt work.

When I get home at night, I send Kryštof a screenshot of the riding statistics. He responds that it looks familiar. Later I ask him how it has felt to get money from nothing.

“Good! At first, it was difficult and there were complicated feelings attached to it, it was your earnings after all. But then I thought that you're benefiting from this too: this is a project that you want to do and which you have the grant for. And in a way, my money is like a grant from you.”

April 23rd. *Helsingin Sanomat* publishes an investigative article called “Black deliveries”, written by Milla Palkoaho, Pauliina Siniauer and Paavo Teittinen. The article confirms the thing I already knew to be true: there's a black market functioning within the ranks of food couriers.

The story reports that the police have had ongoing investigations regarding this matter since 2019. In the most galling cases, people have been recruited to courier work from abroad but first they have had to pay a large sum of threshold money to get into Finland. Here, they have worked as food couriers on the recruiter's account and received only crumbs from long work weeks. In some cases, they haven't been paid at all. The recruiter has instead lounged at home and lived on someone else's work. Hence, human trafficking.

Wolt has said that it has performed unannounced checks to solve this problem (I never encountered one during my time working). The company has nonetheless been aware of the problem before the article in *Helsingin Sanomat*. The courier partner app has at times sent notifications about Wolt having been informed of illegal account lending and that it's performing monitoring. (Just before the publication of this article, Wolt informs the couriers that the app will soon include a facial recognition system.)

“Thousands of people make deliveries on our platform every week. Some of them are in a vulnerable position. We are worried about potential exploitation, or that someone is working on unfair terms, or that someone is working unhealthily long hours”, Wolt's country general Henrik Pankakoski writes in his blog after the article in *Helsingin Sanomat*.

Around the same time, the app sends its cheerful May Day regards and reminds you how to deliver balloons correctly.

To celebrate International Workers' Day, celebrity driver Timur Fearless is performing a 24-hour challenge and delivering hangover food to Finns. He delivers more than a

100 orders and makes 500 euros, about 20 euros per hour. Couple of days later, he reports that he is sick due to a cold and overstrain.

June 6th. I have seen a call in the Facebook group to join an open house event by a labor union. PAM Courier Finland, founded by couriers, has recently been accepted as its own branch within the Service Union United PAM.

When I arrive at the PAM offices in Hakaniemi, there are no couriers there.

PAM's organizing coordinator Mikko Siljander tells me that the two preceding events were also attended by just a few people. He seems disappointed. Only about fifty people have joined the branch so far.

Siljander reflects on potential reasons for the lack of enthusiasm. Maybe PAM isn't familiar to people? It's hard to get the message across, language barrier being just one of the challenges. Trade unions are also associated with waged workers and employment contracts whereas couriers represent a new chapter in many ways.

Organizing couriers started from Jyväskylä. A local active group of drivers tried to reach several places: unions, politicians and organizations. PAM was one of the few that responded to the inquiries and agreed to meet with the couriers.

"It was a cry for help. Now we provide security in that they won't be left to defend themselves alone", Siljander says.

Through the trade union, the drivers can attend training programs among other things. There are courses held for immigrants where they are instructed on the basics of the Finnish work domain and the trade unions' part in it.

Members of the couriers' branch get the same member benefits and rights as other PAM members. For example, they get a discount on gasoline and insurances. However, they still have no business applying to the union's unemployment fund because of their entrepreneurial status.

When not even one courier shows up, Siljander leaves as well. He shuts the door behind him and goes home.

A summery rain beats down on Ympyrätalo. Across the street, a lonely driver in his blue-and-white uniform shivers beneath a canopy. After the rain stops, he gets up on his bike. The traffic light turns green. Slowly his figure disappears into the gentle uphill of Hämeentie.

Some of the couriers' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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