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## **Mobilization of app workers in Brazil and digital platforms: protests and precarization (2019-2020) from the perspective of Protest Event Analysis**

*Movilización de trabajadores de aplicaciones en Brasil y plataformas digitales: protestas y precarización (2019-2020) Desde la Perspectiva del Análisis de Eventos de Protesta*

*Mobilização de trabalhadores de aplicativos no Brasil e plataformas digitais: protestos e precarização (2019-2020) sob a Perspectiva da Análise de Eventos de Protesto*

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**Abstract** This article proposes an analysis of the mobilizations of digital platform workers in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, a period when the vulnerabilities of this category were brought to light. By examining the acts carried out by platform workers in Brazil between 2019 and 2020, using the Protest Event Analysis (PEA) methodology, we aim to understand the main characteristics of these events, highlighting the leadership of delivery workers in the struggle for rights, which culminated in the movement known as “Breque dos Apps”. The analysis of the temporal distribution, the actors involved, the demands, the tactics, the locations of occurrence, and the repression in the protest events revealed significant changes in the variables over the studied period, demonstrating a correlation between the pandemic and these transformations. In addition to providing an overview of the Brazilian scenario, this article maps, analyzes, and interprets a large number of protests, offering data that can be used in future comparative studies.

**Key-words:** Platforming, Work, Protests, Delivery workers.



**Resumen** Este artículo propone un análisis de las movilizaciones de los trabajadores de plataformas digitales en el contexto de la pandemia de Covid-19, un periodo en el que se evidenciaron las vulnerabilidades de esta categoría. Al examinar los actos llevados a cabo por trabajadores de plataformas en Brasil entre 2019 y 2020, utilizando la metodología de Análisis de Eventos de Protesta (PEA), buscamos comprender las principales características de estos eventos, destacando el protagonismo de los repartidores en la lucha por derechos, que culminó en el movimiento conocido como “Breque dos Apps”. El análisis de la distribución temporal, de los actores involucrados, de las demandas, de las tácticas, de los lugares de ocurrencia y de la represión en los eventos de protesta reveló cambios significativos en las variables a lo largo del periodo estudiado, evidenciando una correlación entre la pandemia y estas transformaciones. Además de ofrecer un panorama del escenario brasileño, este artículo mapea, analiza e interpreta un gran número de protestas, proporcionando datos que pueden ser utilizados en futuros estudios comparativos.

**Palabras-clave:** Plataformización, Trabajo, Protestas, Repartidores.

**Resumo** Este artigo propõe uma análise das mobilizações dos trabalhadores de aplicativos digitais no contexto da pandemia de Covid-19, período em que as vulnerabilidades dessa categoria foram evidenciadas. Ao examinar os atos realizados por trabalhadores de aplicativos no Brasil entre 2019 e 2020, utilizando a metodologia de Análise de Eventos de Protesto (PEA), buscamos compreender as principais características desses eventos, destacando o protagonismo dos entregadores na luta por direitos, que culminou no movimento conhecido como “Breque dos Apps”. A análise da distribuição temporal, dos atores envolvidos, das demandas, das táticas, dos locais de ocorrência e da repressão nos eventos de protesto revelou mudanças significativas nas variáveis ao longo do período estudado, evidenciando uma correlação entre a pandemia e essas transformações. Além de oferecer um panorama do cenário brasileiro, este artigo mapeia, analisa e interpreta um grande número de protestos, fornecendo dados que podem ser utilizados em estudos futuros de natureza comparativa.

**Palavras-chave:** Plataformização, Trabalho, Protestos, Entregadores.

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## Introduction

The premise that labor relations adapt to social metamorphoses is confirmed by reality, considering that the convergence of capitalism and digital platforms has standardized virtual interactions, giving rise to new configurations of work relations and conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that the changes occurring in the last two decades in the global capitalist system have resulted from a technological revolution that occurred in different spheres, particularly in the fields of information technology and telecommunications. In this context, digital platforms have come to play a fundamental role in the production of a new type of virtualized subject and governance, where labor relations have given way to services mediated by electronic devices that utilize artificial intelligence and algorithms to intensify its gains.

Considering this context, Tom Slee (2017:16) highlights that various concepts, which initially came into view somewhat optimistically regarding these emerging labor relations, have been mobilized in an attempt to explain these changes, such as: collaborative consumption, mesh economy, peer-to-peer platforms, gig economy, hustle economy, concierge services, or — an increasingly used term — on-demand economy. This diversity of definitions underscores the timeliness and complexity of this new neoliberal economic model that intensifies the speed of financial transactions, resulting in a transformation of workers into ‘entrepreneurs’ and promoting the weakening of labor rights and their subjectivity regarding this new labor dynamic.

In his book titled “Platform Capitalism” Nick Srnicek (2018) also sought to understand this topic. By elucidating the term “lean platforms”<sup>1</sup> — among other forms of digital platforms, such as advertising platforms, cloud platforms, industrial platforms, and product platforms — the author linked the debate on platform internet and contemporary capitalism to new trends in outsourcing, surplus population, increased digitization of life, and the post-2008 crisis unemployment boom. According to the author, this business model, supported by massive data extraction aimed at predictive behavioral purposes, is also characterized by the notable presence of this profile of workers from areas with higher unemployment rates. This is evident, as Srnicek (2018:78) points out, when the company Uber admits that about a third of its drivers in London come from neighborhoods with unemployment rates higher than 10%. In a healthy economy, these people would not need to resort to informality.

The consequent lack of security in the execution of labor activities resulting from the absence of employment ties derived from this type of emerging economy tends to reduce labor rights, creating a context of precarization where the working class faces new, increasingly precarious and unstable working conditions, making the capitalist labor relationship one that is electronically mediated (Munoz *et al.*, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. For this reason, it is

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<sup>1</sup> These platforms range from companies specialized in specific services (such as cleaning, home medical care, supply delivery, plumbing, etc.) to more general markets, like TaskRabbit and Mechanical Turk, which promote a variety of activities. According to Srnicek (2018:50), lean platforms like Uber and Airbnb seek to minimize their assets, aiming to maximize profits by cutting costs as much as possible.

<sup>2</sup> As Antunes (2000:38; 43) highlights, two particularly virulent and severe manifestations have emerged in

possible to affirm that the intertwining of technological advances and the new experiences, as well as the subjects' experiences with work (Antunes, 2000), presumes the rise of a reality under the aegis of a new capitalist modality. This new format directly impacts the lives of workers who operate on digital platforms.

However, although it is common to generalize digital work as “uberization”, as Ricardo Antunes (2021:34) highlighted in recognizing that “given Uber’s rapid and significant global growth, as well as relative similarities to other platforms, the designation of work uberization has consolidated due to its generalization”, it is necessary to emphasize that there are authors like Antonio Casilli (2021:27), who opt for “platformization instead of the uberization of work, considering that this concept involves different ways of extracting value from different digital work platforms.” Corroborating Casilli (2021:31-32), in addition to the notion of uberization not being entirely comprehensive, as it focuses only on the most visible aspect of the platform economy, namely labor value, we recognize that “if we look at digital platforms, they tend to create triple value”: (I) qualification value, which requires qualification and information creation for these platforms to function; (II) monetization value, “which basically means that the data we create and make available online is sometimes turned into monetary value by these same platforms, creating a cash flow for them”; (III) innovation, assuming that the automation process enabled by digital platforms allows for the creation of algorithms that learn and perform, manufacturing deep learning-based artificial intelligence, as well as new tools such as neural networks or even adversarial networks.

In this context, shaped by a new capitalist model and its consequent transformation of work relations and conditions, this article seeks to analyze the actions undertaken by app-based workers in Brazil between 2019 and 2020. The aim is to understand the key characteristics of these events, particularly the role of delivery drivers in leading nationwide advocacy efforts, known as the “Breque dos Apps”<sup>3</sup>. This timeframe is particularly significant, as it marks a period during which the erosion of workers’ rights became most apparent, exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19. We seek to understand if the pandemic intensified the precarization of app-based workers, showing that the neoliberal discourse widespread by private companies that own those digital platforms were harmful for the workers, resulting in significant changes when it comes to the protests analyzed. The main hypothesis is that the evidence of precarization led to mobilizations with specific characteristics.

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this context, which began to take shape at the turn of the last century: “the unprecedented destruction and/or precarization of the working human force, and the increasing degradation of the metabolic relationship between humanity and nature, driven by a logic primarily focused on the production of goods that harm the environment.” In this process, a “mass of unskilled, precarious workers has been created, many of whom are now experiencing part-time, temporary, or partial employment, or facing structural unemployment”.

<sup>3</sup> The political movement of delivery workers — Breque dos Apps, which originated from Instagram profiles called “Treta no trampo” and “Entregadores antifascistas” — was organized as a means of denouncing the working conditions to which they are subjected. Through social media outreach, the movement gained a segment of supporters from society, namely those who were willing to join the struggle by boycotting food and service apps (Oliveira, 2022).

It is worth highlighting, furthermore, that this neoliberal labor configuration emerging in the 21st century, led by digital work platforms, was only possible in Brazil after processes of flexibilization, deregulation, precarization, and informalization of labor occurred intensely in the last decade. This allowed for the unequal conformation associated with the international division of labor, enabling “the superexploitation of labor to become priority spaces for uberized companies, which use and expand through the existence of these ‘facilities’” (Antunes, 2021:36), highlighting the conversion of the worker into a “service provider” who needs to be entrepreneurial. In this process, as Antunes (2021:34) observes, intense exploitation is compounded by a more insidious form of exploitation, which becomes evident when we consider that “workers bear the costs of purchasing (often through financing) vehicles, motorcycles, cars, cell phones, and their upkeep, along with other necessary equipment such as delivery bags.” In other words, a significant portion of the means of production is financed by the workers themselves.

Considering this panorama, the text is divided into two parts. In the first, we present a literature review detailing the theoretical foundations mobilized, mainly from the perspectives of Shoshana Zuboff (2019) and Nick Srnicek (2018), as well as other authors used in the understanding and contextualization of the reality faced by app-based workers. With this review, we hope to objectively present the relevance of analyzing surveillance capitalism and the emergence of lean platforms in the context of labor precarization, highlighting the transformation of labor and interpersonal relations due to technological advancement and highlighting the centrality of digital platforms in people’s lives.

In the second part of this article, the data produced in this research, constructed using the Protest Event Analysis (PEA) method, were exposed and analyzed. The investigation aimed to understand the labor conditions and demands of these workers who are in precarious conditions exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, outlining modest contributions to the literature on work, digital platforms, and pandemics. To this end, we structured the PEA based on accessing and extracting news from the G1 digital newspaper<sup>4</sup>, as well as reports on the reality of app-based delivery workers through the Twitter<sup>5</sup> profile of movement leaders, seeking to understand the demands of protesters, how they organize, and the main challenges they face in their struggles for labor rights in the context of the Covid-19 quarantine, which the investigation was constructed around.

As a particular research method, it is important to mention that the PEA was initially developed by Koopmans and Rucht (2002), with the aim of mapping, analyzing, and interpreting a large amount of protests<sup>6</sup> through content analysis, using sources such as newspaper reports, as well as police records. The authors believe that protest data can be associated with other types of information, allowing for a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of these events, providing a more sophisticated and secure

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<sup>4</sup> It is one of the main means of communication in Brazil.

<sup>5</sup> When this article was made, the social network ‘X’ was still named Twitter.

<sup>6</sup> Although not explicitly cited throughout the article, we draw on the foundational theories of classical sociologists to understand social movements and protests, including the works of Charles Tilly (1978; 2004), Sidney Tarrow (2011), and Doug McAdam (1982; 2001). We conceptualize protest not as an isolated act but as part of a complex process of social interaction and political change.

empirical field to observe protest activities in large geographical spaces over a predetermined period.

Finally, the concluding remarks emphasize the complex dynamics of labor precarization driven by lean platforms, which have sparked protests and social mobilizations advocating for improved working conditions. It also highlights the profound impact of technological consolidation on workers' lives, particularly within the realm of platform-based work. In summary, the conclusions underscore the emergence of new economic and labor paradigms shaped by entrepreneurship and neoliberal precarization.

## **From Surveillance Capitalism to Lean Platforms: The Precarization of Labor**

The consolidation of the digital age and technological advancement in the context of labor precarization has significantly transformed interpersonal and labor relations, introducing experiences mediated by virtualized devices. As Miskolci (2016) highlights, since the onset of the internet's generalization, we have begun to enter a reality in which relationships mediated by digital platforms have gradually gained centrality in people's lives. In the "labor's world", it was no different.

In her book titled "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism" Shoshana Zuboff (2019) underscores the instrumental relationship between what she termed as "behavioral futures markets," and "behavioral surplus" from this second wave of the internet, called Web 2.0 or platform internet. According to the author, surveillance capitalism, through platforms like Google and Facebook, unilaterally claimed human experience as a kind of free raw material aimed at translating data into eventual future behaviors. In this case, some information extracted from users of these platforms is applied to the improvement of products and services, while the rest is declared as behavioral surplus, which fuels advanced manufacturing processes known as machine learning, manufacturing them into predictive products that anticipate individual actions.

Observing the emergence of a new type of power that arises with this surveillance capitalism — in a context characterized by labor precarization, we could add — called instrumentalism, instrumentarianism, or instrumental power, Zuboff (2019) not only highlighted that it seeks to understand human behavior but also found that this technology began to shape it for the benefit of third parties — both commercial and political purposes. This is why, when analyzing how these platform companies have spread vehemently across social networks, Zuboff (2019:21-22) noted that they operate through a standard model of business plans. In this sense, the author argues that surveillance capitalism is no longer driven by the competitive drama of major internet companies, in which future behavioral markets were targeted only for their online advertising. For Zuboff (2019), its mechanisms and economic imperatives have become the standard model for most businesses based on the internet.

Here, a point open to criticism about the analyses presented by Zuboff (2019) can be found, especially because it seems that the author establishes a kind of homogenization



regarding the business plans of these technology companies. In this case, she gives the reader the impression that there would be no significant differences between these different platforms, considering that they all operate through data extraction from their users for predictive and advertising purposes. However, according to Nick Srnicek (2018), there is not only a single type or model of digital platform, and therefore, there is not a single purpose for this type of company, nor a single business plan, although data extraction and its algorithmic use are a present fact among them.

Thus, in analyzing this phenomenon also investigated by Zuboff (2019), Srnicek (2018) found the existence of five types of digital platforms, with lean platforms – beyond advertising platforms, cloud platforms, industrial platforms, and product platforms – being the most important for our analysis, precisely because they are examples like Uber, Airbnb, iFood, among others. According to the author, this type of digital platform would operate through subcontracting that violates employment guarantees established by law, thereby exempting themselves from any legal problems, justifying their condition and not acting as an employer, but as a service provider.

Another valid criticism directed at Zuboff's (2019) book arises from her predominantly economic reading of this phenomenon, which seems to disregard the modes of subjectivation resulting from the increasingly frequent varied uses of digital platforms, also from symbolic perspectives. Thus, Zuboff (2019) seems to overlook the effects of transplatformic subjection beyond its material dimension, considering that her approach appears to consider the business model of austere platforms in a generalized way, as if it were reflected in other modalities (Rosa, Amaral & Nemer, 2023).

However, when discussing lean platforms, which according to Srnicek (2018) would have Uber and Airbnb as examples, a very distinct purpose can be found compared to the so-called advertising platforms, as with Google and Facebook, understood by the author as the founding companies of this new capitalist modality. While this second type of platform company operates through massive data extraction for predictive purposes about human behavior and its modulatory capacity, as highlighted by Zuboff (2019), the former operates through a combination of technological development with exploitation in the old-fashioned way, as Callum Cant (2021:52) found in reporting his experience in England working as a delivery app worker for an lean platform called Deliveroo<sup>7</sup>:

Deliveroo is a food delivery platform. It means different things depending on your perspective. From the consumer's perspective, it's an app that charges a fee to bring food from the restaurant to your home. For the restaurant owner, it's an outsourced delivery service that takes a portion of all their delivery sales. For the delivery riders, it's an app that pays to take food from restaurants to customers' homes. For investors, it's a company to inject millions of pounds into, in the hope that it will one day become a profitable operation (Cant, 2021:52).

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<sup>7</sup> At this very moment, while we revise the final version of this article, app workers in England are staging a public demonstration for better working conditions. Available at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13040021/deliveroo-just-eat-uber-eats-drivers-strike.html>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

However, it is important to mention, as we highlighted earlier, that according to Casilli (2021), through the instrumentalization of more sophisticated technological elements, a triple value can be found in the platform economy, beyond the old labor value: qualification value, monetization value, and innovation.

In this sense, despite the predictive and modulatory capacity of human behavior, different platform companies operate in various ways, unlike what Zuboff (2019) seems to present, although they do not hesitate to use algorithmic knowledge to assess gains, as she rightly points out. Thus, regardless of the differences, it is precisely through the austere platforms mentioned by Srnicek (2018) that the surveillance capitalism presented by Zuboff (2019) finds space to continue to spread in a context of labor precarization — hence the importance of the connection between the two terms and authors, without disregarding the configuration of the new reality of the precariat (Antunes, 2000; Munoz *et al.* 2020).

This way of doing business, which breaks with the standard format, consequently, affects the world of labor, as seen in the mobilization of delivery workers who provide services for these apps and are also products of these new specificities within the scope of the relationship between employee and employer. Understanding these platforms in the context of precarization is therefore essential for a better understanding of the Breque dos Apps mobilization, as well as its main characteristics.

## **The new labor relations led by lean platforms in the pandemic context**

As evidenced in the analyses by Srnicek (2018) and Zuboff (2019), we are under the aegis of a new type of governance led by private companies operating as digital platforms, which proves to be a very evident reality, given the increasingly intense demands for constant use of social networks. Consequently, it is possible to observe that a significant portion of our contemporary actions involve the use of digital platforms as technological devices for virtualized mediation, access to information, and communication, a trend that seems to have intensified with the emergence and post-pandemic of Covid-19.

Nevertheless, to address the strike of delivery app workers that began in 2020 in Brazil, it is essential to understand the justifications mobilized by austere platforms. According to these companies, there should be no accountability for any problems involving workers, as they merely establish digital intermediation in service provision. Thus, apps absolve themselves of responsibility towards workers, who submit to their rules precisely because they do not find an alternative for their subsistence in this context of labor precarization led by digital platforms.

In its defense regarding a lawsuit filed against the company by the São Paulo<sup>8</sup> Court of Justice, Uber delimited the scope of its operation, arguing that it is nothing more than

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<sup>8</sup> Although Uber has frequently justified disclaimers of responsibility regarding users who provide services to the company, it is reasonable to assume that the protests initiated by these workers have had some effect, considering that state actions have begun to emerge with the aim of holding the company accountable in certain situations, as evidenced by the decision RRAg-849-82.2019.5.07.0002 from the Superior Labor



a “mere intermediary between independent drivers and those interested in the transport they offer,” maintaining that, despite the lack of responsibility, at the time of the accident, the driver was not transporting any app user. Furthermore, Uber argued that “drivers are independent and free to make their own schedules”.

Workers on delivery platforms rarely have access to social security, and when they do, it is often in a precarious manner<sup>9</sup>. During Covid-19 pandemic, for example, they could not temporarily leave work, and most of the time, did not have access to medical certificates. Faced with this situation, they were left to protect themselves against the virus in the workplace since, in general, lean platforms did not provide safety equipment.

Another issue that requires more thorough analysis is the idea of freedom propagated by the apps, considering the obstacle it creates as the discourse of mediation and exemption of responsibility towards labor rights is applied. According to Tassinari, Chesta and Cini (2020:132), many platforms have escaped the obligation to provide essential personal protective equipment to delivery workers during the pandemic, on the grounds that the workers are independent collaborators. In this case, the decision to continue working or not is seen as a forced choice between maintaining the only source of income or maintaining one’s own health.

The idea that individual choice is hierarchically superior to social rights is also fueled by neoliberal political discourse, which is generally intrinsically associated with private companies, as is the case with the platforms studied here. Regarding the connection between the discourse defended by the apps and neoliberal politics, Abílio (2019) asserts that:

This indistinction operates powerfully, for example, in the discourse of the company Uber, which calls on the driver to be “their own boss.” Entrepreneurship generally becomes synonymous with assuming the risks of one’s own activity. There is an important shift here from unemployment as a social issue to attributing to the individual the responsibility for their survival in a context of uncertainty and precariousness. Concerning the “Uberization,” it is seen that such entrepreneurial discourse serves as a vehicle for obscuring the relations between capital and labor, as workers appear as “masters of themselves,” that is, the relationship of subordination disappears, and a multitude of self-entrepreneurs emerge (Abílio, 2019:04).

This discourse, combined with the absence of an employment relationship between the parties, strengthens concurrently. Thus, platforms use the power of this rhetoric to reduce costs associated with labor charges and other benefits, distancing themselves from the worker while still profiting. However, even though it operates in a seductive manner and supposedly in the name of freedom, this neoliberal discourse of entrepreneurial nature led by these companies has not prevented delivery app workers from organizing in defense of their rights, which were further compromised by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic that worsened in 2020, directly affecting those professionals. It was in the midst

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Court (TST). Available at <https://www.tst.jus.br/-/turma-reconhece-responsabilidade-objetiva-da-uber-por-acidente-que-vitimou-motorista-do-aplicativo>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Available at <https://jus.com.br/artigos/78377/motoristas-de-uber-e-o-inss>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

of this context that the Breque dos Apps mobilization was born. As highlighted by Felix (2023:46), in a context where the working conditions and subsistence of “uberized” workers in Brazil were denounced, calls for mobilization gained significant traction, resulting in “broad social adherence from other workers and middle classes”. This will be our discussion in the next section.

### **The Breque dos Apps Mobilization in Brazil: An Analysis Through the Perspective of Protest Event Analysis (PEA)**

Before presenting an analysis of the data resulting from the conducted research, the main contribution of this article, is necessary to highlight that the elaboration of this study occurred through the utilization of the Protest Event Analysis (PEA) as the employed method. This is because we believe that this tool proves to be quite fruitful precisely because it is used in understanding the transformations in the characteristics and dynamics of collective mobilizations over time.

According to Koopmans and Rucht (2002), the pioneers of PEA were rebellion students and historical sociologists who showed great interest in explaining the trend of strikes and collective violence, having developed methods and other investigative procedures with the aim of understanding these movements. Furthermore, in theoretical and methodological terms, PEA can be used as a tool aimed at identifying, mapping, and measuring protests, generating numerous analytical opportunities for researchers. As Koopmans and Rucht (2002:09) highlight:

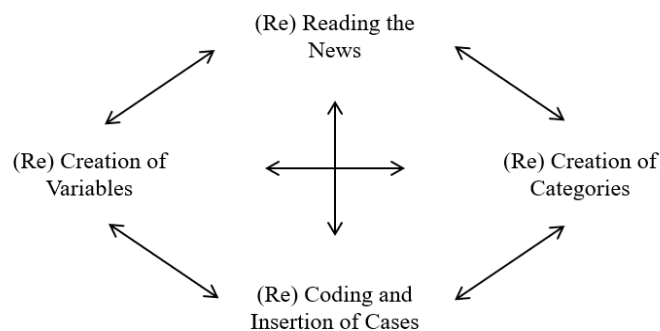
In recent decades, Protest Event Analysis (PEA) has been developed to systematically map, analyze, and interpret the occurrence and properties of a large number of protests through content analysis, using sources such as newspaper reports and police records. These protest data can, in turn, be linked to other types of data to study the causes and consequences of protest. In contrast to previous work in controversial politics, social movements, riots, revolutions, and the like, PEA provides a more solid empirical basis for observing protest activities over large geographic areas over a considerable period of time (Koopmans & Rucht, 1999:09).

One of the main advantages of this methodological approach is its capacity to construct catalogs of events related to various types of movements, allowing researchers to observe patterns and changes over time within a specific context. However, these event catalogs may not capture the entirety of existing protests, as they typically include only those that are significant enough to attract media attention, particularly when relying on newspapers as a research source (Tatagiba & Galvão, 2019:67). Additionally, one can argue that the use of the term ‘protest’ may have imposed certain limitations on the research, as there may be other forms of demands and strikes that do not explicitly employ this terminology. However, despite these constraints, the methodological choice to focus on the term ‘protest’ remains valuable, as it allows for a more in-depth analysis of the specific dynamics and patterns associated with this form of collective action.

As initially highlighted, the PEA method was applied to the reality of protests by app workers that occurred in Brazil between 2019 and 2020. Data collection was carried out through the G1 newspaper, one of the country’s main communication channels outside digital platforms<sup>10</sup>. The selection of this media outlet is justified due to its national coverage, which allows for a more thorough understanding of the dynamics of these events in different regions of the country, considering the national characteristic of the protests as well. This enabled the construction of a “protest events catalog” conducted using the employed methodology. This catalog (or “protest bank”) allowed us to generate important quantitative data that can be used by researchers in other occasions, enabling more detailed analyses of the subject at hand.

However, it is important to note that, “to the extent that the purpose of the PEA methodology is to produce a consistent empirical basis for testing hypotheses and analytical models, the researcher must pay attention and ensure both internal and external validity of the data” (Silva, Araujo & Pereira 2016:317). Therefore, the process of constructing the catalog presented here was based on the guidelines outlined by the chosen methodology, which is well represented by the figure below:

**Figure 1.** Catalog Construction Processage



Source: Adapted from Silva, Araújo e Pereira (2016:327).

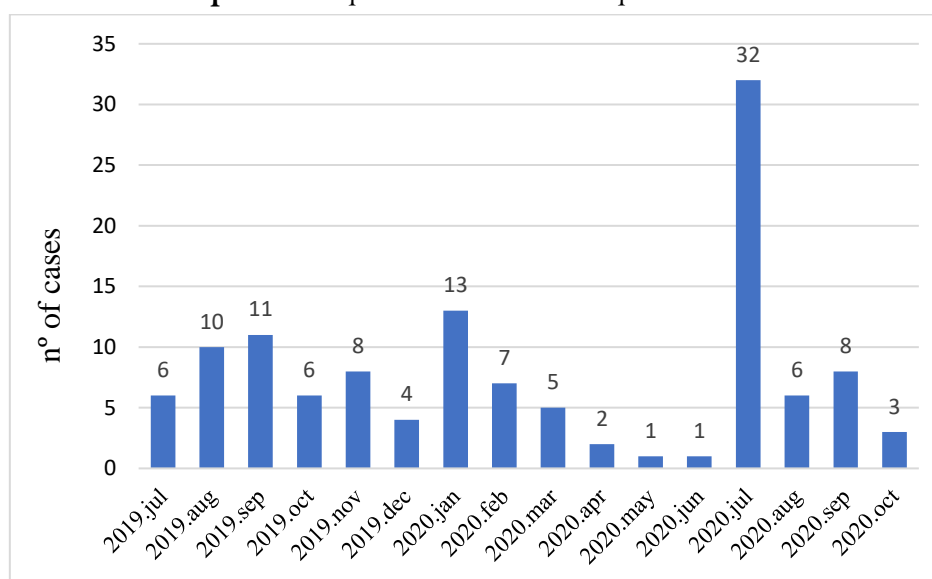
Considering the presented workflow, we developed a protocol following some procedures that were essential for the construction of the database. After defining the unit of analysis, sampling techniques, and research sources, the following variables were observed and coded based on: (I) temporal distribution of the event; (II) actor promoting the event; (III) demands presented in the events; (IV) target of the protesters; (V) tactics used by the protesters; (VI) location in the city where the protest took place; (VII) possible police repression.

Following this data collection protocol, we accessed the G1 website, the chosen newspaper for the construction of the protest events catalog. The objective, in this case, was to filter the words “protest app” so that the algorithm would recognize any movement

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that there are criticisms regarding the use of only one newspaper in research, particularly due to potential biases. However, as Koopmans and Rucht (2002) emphasize, it is essential to consider the cost and time involved in coding the events necessary for the analysis, which is quite common in this type of methodological approach.

or news in this regard. The search was conducted through a customized period, looking month by month for each year (2019-2020). Thus, identified news articles were saved and analyzed to extract the intended variables. Each coding allowed for specific analyses and the construction of different viewpoints on the same event, which will be presented below:

**Graph 1.** Temporal distribution of protest events



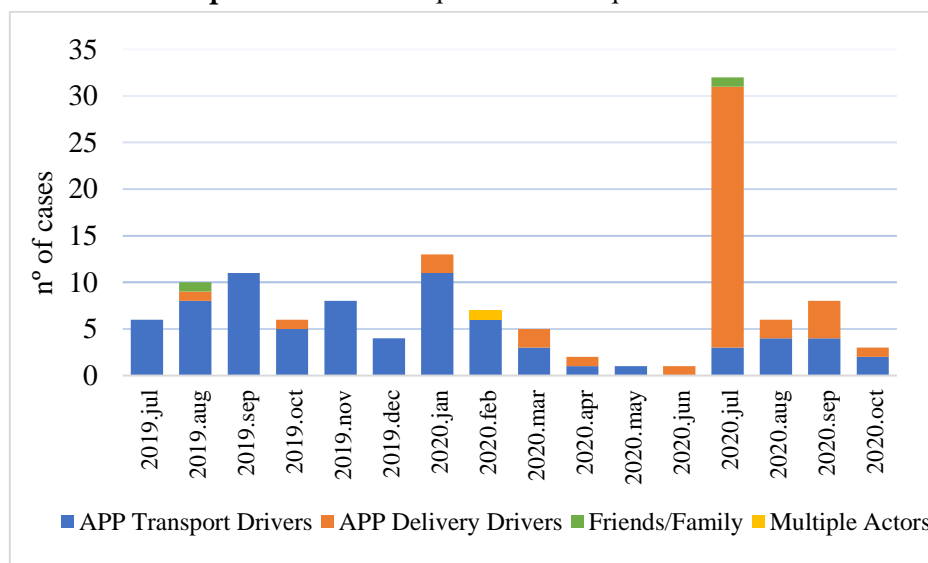
Source: Prepared by the authors.

It is worth noting that the sudden increase in protest events occurred due to the mobilizing force of delivery drivers. According to Desgranges and Ribeiro (2021:196), “the latent precarization of the service, aggravated by the lack of support during the pandemic and the sharp decrease in the value paid for deliveries, the context coming from the United States revealed the possibility of demonstrations even during the pandemic”. Thus, the largest national protests took place in July 2020, with the support of different actors.

Although the protests decreased in the following months, the topic remained present in some of the country’s main media outlets, presenting some relevance in the Brazilian public debate, as strikes continued to occur, with collectives driving organization and mobilization among workers. An example of this is the engagement of the @tretanotrampo page on Instagram, a profile that was a pioneer in mobilizing delivery drivers’ protests in 2020, which still makes recurring posts about the performance of this professional class characterized by the intensification of work precariousness due to the business model of such companies.

The graph below illustrates the dynamics of the protests between July 2019 and October 2020, based on the different profiles of participants as actors and promoters of the event:

**Graph 2.** Actors and promoters of protest events



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Considering this, it is important to recognize that both transport drivers and app-based delivery drivers form a new professional category, each with distinct aspirations and needs within the market. Despite the focus of the presented article being primarily on delivery drivers, we also collected data on the movements of app-based transport drivers for comparative purposes, especially noteworthy is that the other figures encompass all actor-promoters of events described in this topic, not just delivery drivers.

It is evident that, given the current forms of work, new challenges and demands have been presented to the daily lives of workers. In 2019, before the pandemic, most identified protests were mobilized by app-based transport drivers advocating for safety and labor activity regulation. The following year, the landscape changed, and delivery drivers became the protagonists of the news analyzed, as evidenced in the previous graph.

To complement our analysis, it's worth briefly understanding the profile of delivery drivers in Brazil<sup>11</sup>. In a report released by the Workers' Unique Central Office (CUT) and the International Labour Organization (ILO)<sup>12</sup>, it was shown that the majority of delivery drivers interviewed during a study conducted in Brasília (DF) were men (92%), aged between 19 and 45 years old (48%), and of mixed race (52%). Based on these data, it can be inferred that informal labor statistics are closely linked to the characteristics of poverty in Brazil, and, in addition, the risks involved in the activity limit the observed sociodemographic profile. Regarding occupation characteristics, the majority perform deliveries through IFood (90%), using motorcycles (89%), and utilizing virtual social networks for work (51%). This demonstrates a great predominance of only one company

<sup>11</sup> Although the study presents the profile of workers only in Brasília and Recife, it was included both for the robustness of its data and its relevance as a localized sample that can be considered as a subset of the national panorama. It also directly dialogues with our database, which includes data from those same cities.

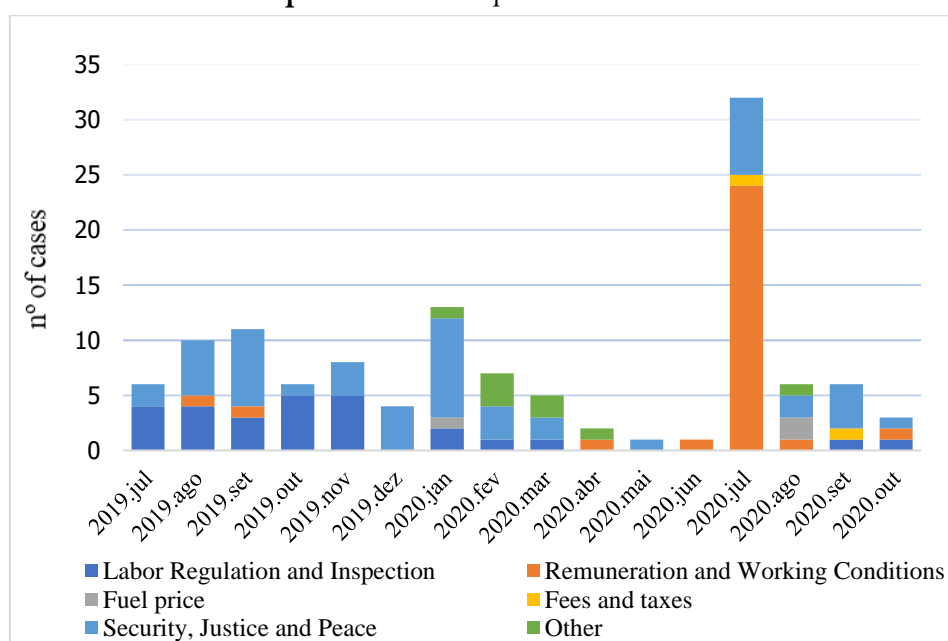
<sup>12</sup> Available at <https://www.cut.org.br/noticias/cut-e-oit-lancam-pesquisa-sobre-o-precario-trabalho-de-entregadores-por-aplicati-4d37>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

in the Brazilian market, as well as the importance of the virtual realm for the performance of the delivery drivers' work.

The report titled “Working conditions, rights, and social dialogue for workers in the delivery sector through APPs in Brasília and Recife”, produced by CUT and ILO, also found that the respondents work an average of 65.7 hours per week, earning a gross monthly income of R\$ 2,805.1. However, it's necessary to consider that the work hours are individual and vary considerably, as these companies argue that these workers have the advantage of being able to choose their working hours, thus allowing them to have other forms of remunerated activity beyond those dedicated to the austere platforms. Moreover, when asked if the income extracted from working with Apps is sufficient to support the delivery driver and their family, 74% responded negatively.

Regarding the advantages of working for this type of company that simultaneously operates as a digital platform, the majority (24%) responded affirmatively regarding the feeling of freedom and the possibility of supplementing income. However, regarding disadvantages, the majority (34%) cited labor risks and lack of rights (30%). The narrative of freedom and autonomy still finds space among workers, which can be a demobilizing factor, as 83.5% do not belong to unions or political collectives, and 56.7% did not participate in the protests<sup>13</sup> that came to be called the “Breque dos Apps.” The following graph highlights their main demands:

**Graph 3.** Demands presented at events



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Different demands were observed in the analyzed protests, and it's clear that the demands are directly associated with the actors responsible for promoting the events. While app-based drivers demanded peace and security, delivery drivers focused more on

<sup>13</sup> Available at <https://www.cut.org.br/acao/condicoes-de-trabalho-direitos-e-dialogo-social-para-trabalhadoras-e-trabalhador-ac01>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.



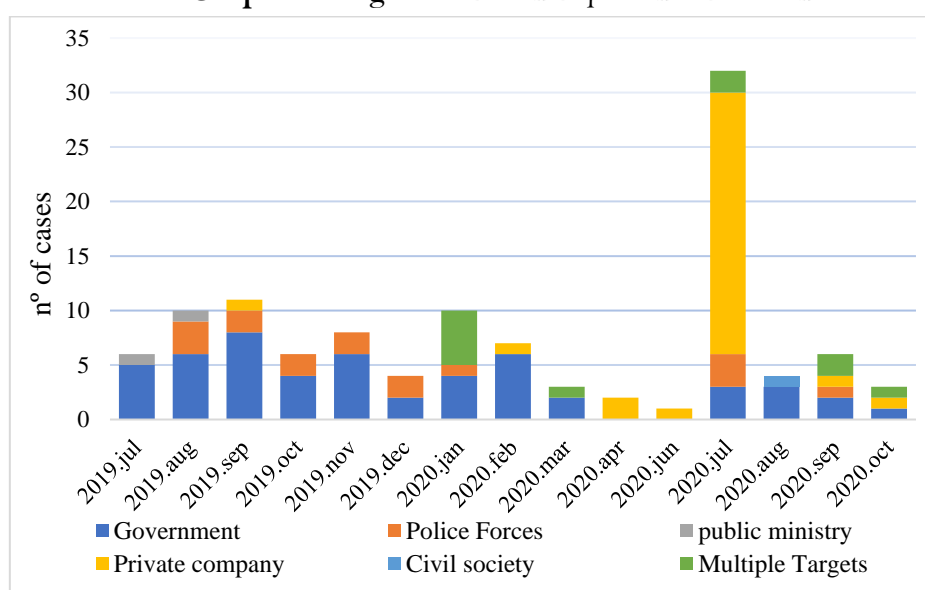
demands regarding remuneration and working conditions. These data highlight the worsening of labor precarization, as also emphasized by Munoz *et al.* (2021:89), who stated:

The popular protests known as the “Breque dos Apps” that occurred in July 2020 served to demonstrate how inequality is present in the daily lives of these workers, and how unity around a common goal has the power to demand better working conditions, guarantee fair remuneration, and ensure decent health and safety conditions for all (Munoz, 2021:89).

For collectively engaged workers, the apps should guarantee better working conditions, which gradually deteriorated due to the vigor and intensity with which the Covid-19 pandemic spread throughout Brazil and the world starting in 2020. This led to a significant increase in home delivery orders during the quarantine, making the work of app workers indispensable, especially in large urban centers, highlighting the need for greater appreciation of this important and rising professional category.

In a country plagued by inequality, poverty, and economic crisis, the excessive working hours provided by these lean platforms became the reality for many who had no other option but to submit to the precariousness of work as the only way to guarantee their subsistence amid a context characterized by a global pandemic. Amidst this, there arises the need for demands aligned with issues of remuneration, transparency, and support from the companies, which do not even cover the backpacks used by the workers in their daily lives. As shown in the graph below, it is evident that in July 2020, the month when the Breque dos Apps protests emerged and delivery workers took center stage in these events, private companies became the primary targets of demands. The call for labor improvements was directed specifically at the apps, which were reluctant to address these requests due to the costs involved, as fulfilling them would likely reduce their shareholders’ profits.

**Graph 4.** Targets of demands presented at events



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Piaia *et al.* (2021:59) understand that the role of communication and digital media in the dynamics of coordination, mobilization, and political action has “assumed the centrality of the medium in which groups and social movements organize, disseminate, and amplify their struggles.” Therefore, it is important to highlight the role of delivery workers on social networks, especially in the way they outline their demands and target their goals. Such perceptions can be observed on personal social media accounts, such as one of the main leaders of the Breque dos Apps, Paulo Lima, known as Galo, or on collective movement pages available on digital platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc., such as @tretanotrampo, @entregadores\_antifascistas, among others.

Therefore, it is important to highlight that part of the research presented also relied on the observation of this type of material led by app workers, which were extracted from some excerpts portraying the scenarios depicted by the actors studied here. It is evident the anti-systemic and anti-capitalist criticisms on the pages of the members of this movement, who seek to daily denounce the actions of the app companies through videos, art, and texts. In this case, it is possible to exemplify Galo’s<sup>14</sup> perception through a video posted on his Instagram, where he says:

Hello, my name is Paulo, I’m a delivery driver and I’ve been working with Uber, Rappi, and IFood apps for about 8 to 9 months. This is my only source of income, it’s what I use to pay off my debts that I incurred to work. It’s what I use to provide for my family. My complaint, which I’m going to make, is about the abandonment that the apps have had with delivery drivers: we didn’t receive hand sanitizer from the apps. At least, I didn’t receive any message to pick up or retrieve this hand sanitizer from anywhere. The apps don’t guarantee food for the delivery driver, who goes hungry on the streets. Do you know how torturous it is for a hungry delivery driver having to carry food on their back? And their logo on their back? Because what has made these apps grow is the number of delivery drivers promoting these apps around São Paulo. And we don’t get paid for that. (...) These apps are opportunists, they come to third world countries where unemployment rates are absurd and launch this as an opportunity for extra income knowing that people need it as their main source of income.

Therefore, in addition to monitoring and searching for articles published on the G1 portal, the research also relied on the accounts of the reality of delivery drivers through the Twitter profile of movement leaders. In another one of his denunciations against IFood, Galo<sup>15</sup> posted: “IFood paid R\$1 million to air a commercial during the Jornal Nacional break yesterday, but they don’t give us a plate of food. Have you read our response to them?”. This demonstrates dissatisfaction from this speaker about what the company’s priorities would be, which has high capital and, despite this, does not provide better working conditions for app workers.

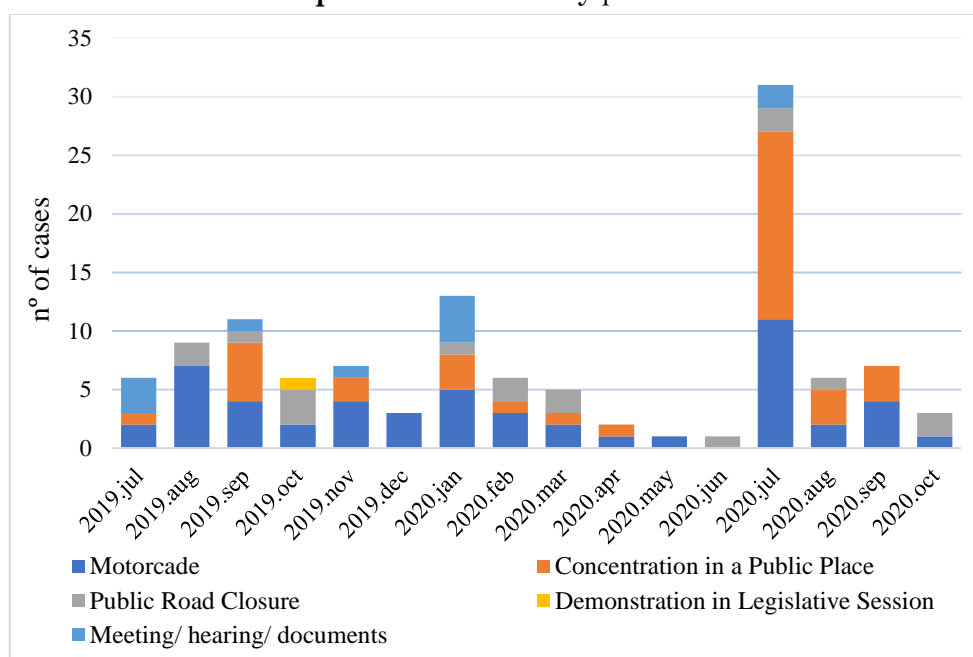
<sup>14</sup> Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJVlOOEHa8D/>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Available at <https://twitter.com/galodeluta/status/1278756995143696385>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

Given the statements made by Galo and other important movement leaders, it is possible to observe a denunciatory stance on the part of these speakers<sup>16</sup>, who feel greatly harmed by the political system and the companies that hire them, absolving themselves of the cost of protective materials in the face of Covid-19 to offer to those who actually need it, since they use these digital platforms as their only means of subsistence.

It is also worth highlighting the action tactics observed in the protest events. Particularly regarding the “breque” (which in English could be translated as strike), Weiss and Duarte (2020:116) highlight that it is “a political strategy to halt work, encouraging participation so that customers boycott the use of the apps, as well as giving them bad ratings, with the goal of lowering their rating and drawing attention to the disregard for workers”. In addition to this broader action, which encompasses different strategies, we also observed other tactics, as shown in the graph below, with a focus on caravans and gatherings in public places:

**Graph 5. Tactics used by protesters**



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The mobilization was not limited to the demandeurs, as it was also possible to observe support from sectors of civil society, collectives, political parties, digital influencers, and artists, which increased visibility for this cause and strengthened the fight for better working conditions for those who engage in labor activities mediated by lean platforms<sup>17</sup>.

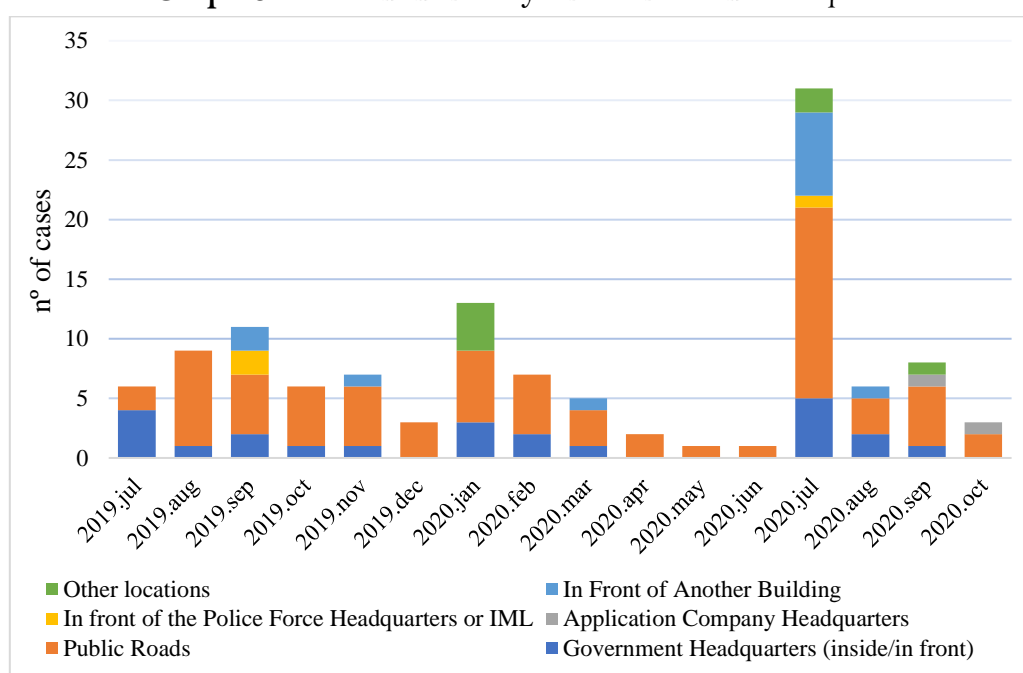
<sup>16</sup> Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb7n0s8utmX/>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Available at <https://www.redebrasilatual.com.br/trabalho/breque-dos-apps-greve-entregadores/>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

In parallel, we also found a strategy of demobilization coordinated and promoted by IFood itself against the workers who were organizing to defend their rights. This fact was widely revealed by Agência Pública in an article published on April 4, 2022<sup>18</sup>, titled “IFood’s Hidden Propaganda Machine.” According to the article, this company hired advertisers to pose as delivery drivers with the purpose of dismantling their demands, through the artificial creation of a supposed movement called “Don’t stop my work.”<sup>19</sup>

Even in the face of the demobilization strategy promoted by IFood against the Breque dos Apps mobilization, it is possible to find a more heterogeneous approach in the graph related to the location of the events, therefore possessing greater diversity of variables.

**Graph 6.** Location in the city where the event took place



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Finally, another equally relevant point is police repression at protest events<sup>20</sup>. On this point, the data suggests that this type of violence did exist, but in a non-constant manner. In the proposed time period for analysis, as shown in the graph below, the occurrence of police repression<sup>21</sup> at events was mainly observed in the months of November 2019, July 2020, September 2020, and October 2020. However, it is possible to ascertain that when the majority of protesters were composed of app-based drivers (Uber), the repression was lower.

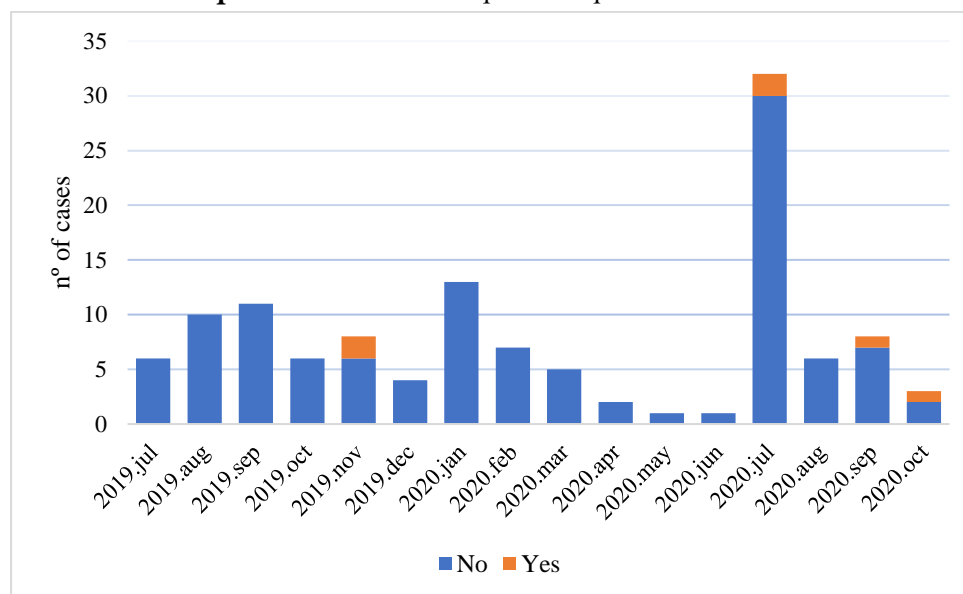
<sup>18</sup> Available at <https://apublica.org/2022/04/a-maquina-oculta-de-propaganda-do-ifood/>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Available at <https://www.facebook.com/naobrecameutrampo/>. Accessed on February 3, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> In the context of the June 2013 protests in Brazil, which extended until 2016 and is characterized in the literature as the Protest Cycle 2013–2016 (Pinto 2017; Silva 2018), police repression during protests has been a recent research topic. For a detailed reading on this subject, see Fernandes (2020; 2023).

<sup>21</sup> In this research, we considered any attempt made by the police to obstruct protests as repression.

**Graph 7.** Occurrence of police repression at events



Source: Prepared by the authors.

However, this scenario changed after the shift in the dynamics of actors and demands with the popularization of the “Breque dos Apps”, which can be explained by the nature of the protests themselves, as well as the social background of the organized class. Thus, while the demands of app-based drivers were less politicized, the opposite occurred with the delivery workers, considering the speeches made by their main representatives.

Therefore, the emergence of the global coronavirus pandemic, which began at the end of 2019 and worsened in 2020, seems to have shown the global population, especially the most impoverished segment of society, particularly in the Global South, that even in the face of technological advances that led to the rise and dominance of digital platforms in our daily lives, work precarization not only remains present but appears to have worsened when we consider the business model of lean platforms and their consequent app-mediated work.

## Final considerations

The presented article sought to demonstrate the complex dynamics surrounding labor precarization resulting from mediations occurring through lean platforms (Srnicsek 2018), culminating in protests and social mobilizations demanding improvements in the working conditions of app-based workers. The consolidation of technology as an essential part of workers’ lives in the context of precarization has generated consequences that are still being analyzed, especially in the lives of those who work under these conditions, made possible through the so-called platform internet.

Thus, the analyses employed here were important for understanding a process that can still be understood as emergent, being directly connected with new forms of economy, new forms of work, and consequently, new forms of neoliberal precarization that are

intensifying under the auspices of entrepreneurship and its competitive capitalist spirit that vehemently imposes itself on workers in the dawn of the 21st century.

In this sense, Zuboff's (2019) contributions on surveillance capitalism — which massively collects personal data, using artificial intelligence and algorithms to intensify profit extraction through the extraction of behavioral surplus — are important for understanding the growth of digital apps and the “uberization of work” spearheaded by this type of digital platform. Linked to this process of life digitization and new forms of capitalist accumulation, the on-demand economy further externalizes these platform companies, which act as mere service intermediaries, exempting themselves from their most basic labor responsibilities.

In this regard, the creation of the database presented in this article contributes to a greater understanding of the relationship between the data captured through the chosen newspaper and the accounts of some of its leaders, and the analysis presented from the theoretical framework mobilized in this research. During the observed period (2019-2020), alterations in all analyzed variables were observed, defined with the aim of elucidating the dynamics involving the actors and their demands.

The changes observed in all selected variables — actors, demands, tactics, locations of events, and repression — support the hypothesis that COVID-19 had a significant impact on app-based workers' protests. As previously demonstrated, the demands of delivery workers, who belong to a more vulnerable segment of society, differ from those of app drivers. The neoliberal discourse propagated by lean app companies, as highlighted by Zuboff (2019), Srnicek (2018), and other authors discussed earlier in this paper, has undermined the protection of social rights for this group of workers, prompting them to advocate for better working conditions starting in 2020.

In this context, the “Breque dos Apps” mobilization played a central role, which presented changes in the other variables depending mainly on the context of the demands and who was making them. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that while the protests of 2019 were marked by the protagonism of app-based drivers, generic agendas, and the absence of specific targets, the events in 2020 evidenced the vehement defense of labor rights and better working conditions for app-based delivery workers, in clear opposition to the platform companies. Additionally, it is important to highlight that the pandemic exposed the neglect and lack of responsibility of these companies towards delivery workers, prompting them to organize protests and other strategies to demand better working conditions.





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