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of Self-Employed Yoga Teachers
Against Fitness Platforms**

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‘Yoga is Not a Sport’: Mobilisation of Self-Employed Yoga Teachers Against Fitness Platforms

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the rise of fitness platforms offering students access to online classes. However, there appears to be little research on how fitness professionals perceive and engage with these platforms. This article focuses on a group of yoga teachers in Berlin who resisted the growing influence of fitness platforms in their field. Using a mixed-methods approach, this case study of the Fair Yoga Initiative investigates why and how this group of self-employed workers mobilised against platforms. Previous research suggests that self-employed platform workers face numerous challenges in building collective power, including workforce heterogeneity and fragmentation. This study reveals the importance of subjective interests in overcoming these challenges and motivating yoga teachers to defend their profession from pressures of valorisation represented by fitness platforms. The article explores how gender might play a part in shaping subjective interests in this feminised profession. Moreover, the text highlights the importance of self-employed workers’ rights in the current debates about regulations of digital labour platforms in the European Union. Despite operating in a restrictive legal

environment, in this case the yoga teachers leveraged their collective power to influence public discourse on fitness platforms. I argue that new worker organizations can spotlight the rights of specific professional groups and contribute to the development of laws that better protect their interests.

Keywords: self-employed workers, mobilisations, platforms, law, gender.

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«As yogis we try to be kind and do the right thing.
Being a conscious consumer means thinking about what kind of businesses we’d like to see.
Why not support local indie businesses rather than platform capitalism?»
Fair Yoga Initiative (1)

1. Introduction

In June 2020, a group of yoga teachers in Berlin engaged in the Fair Yoga Initiative (FYI) started a social media campaign discouraging students from using fitness platforms. Three months earlier, all yoga classes had to move online due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first lockdown left some teachers feeling that they were becoming increasingly dependent on fitness platforms to maintain their relationship with the students. The teachers responded by asking students to be ‘conscious consumers’ and resist ‘platform capitalism’ represented by fitness platforms.

In recent years, the rapid growth of fitness platforms has been driven by the increase in the number of people accessing online classes from home (2). One example of this platform model is companies that offer flexible access to a broad range of sports activities through a single membership. For a fixed price, members can select from various in-person services provided by local businesses, without having to commit to them in the long-term. In Berlin, several such platforms operated during the pandemic, but it was Urban Sports Club (USC) that dominated the local market. (3). During the first lockdown, these companies quickly pivoted their business model to offer online classes, a shift that solidified their position as online fitness platforms.

This article turns attention to yoga teachers as a particular group of workers whose labour is mediated by this type of platforms. This highly feminised professional group is interesting for several reasons (4). First, motivations for practicing and teaching

(1) Infographic posted on the FYI’s social media accounts in June 2020.

(2) H. Zhang, Q. Sun, *The Transformation Mechanism of Fitness Clubs: Pricing of Joint Fitness Courses by Online Platforms and Well-Known Coaches*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2024, 76, 103539.

(3) J. Frisse, *Urban Sports Club: Aufstand der Ausgeglichenen*, *Die Zeit*, Hamburg, 22 September 2020, www.zeit.de/arbeit/2020-09/urban-sports-club-yoga-stunde-preis-kurse-lehrende, accessed 30 April 2024.

(4) C. Fuchs, *Yoga in Deutschland*, Kohlhammer, 1990.

yoga often go beyond interest in physical exercise and involve spirituality ⁽⁵⁾. Second, teaching yoga can be seen as a form of ‘lifestyle entrepreneurship’ pursued by individuals driven by personal values, interests, and passion rather than by economic benefits ⁽⁶⁾. Finally, teaching yoga is frequently pursued as part-time self-employment, which can be combined with another job or family obligations ⁽⁷⁾.

The study focuses on a group of self-employed yoga teachers who engaged in the FYI to resist the impact of platforms on their professional field. This main goal of this case study is to contribute to the field of platform studies by investigating why and how this group of workers mobilised against fitness platforms. By turning attention to a case of mobilisation in a highly feminised professional field, this article explores the importance of gender in understanding how workers construct their interests. Drawing on the power resources approach, the article investigates how yoga teachers harnessed the threat posed by platforms to mobilise for collective action ⁽⁸⁾. The article also aims to highlight the importance of self-employed workers in the current regulatory debates in the European Union (EU). For that reason, it draws attention to how law constrains organisations of self-employed workers, but also how new worker organisations can shape the law by experimenting with different legal forms ⁽⁹⁾.

Section two of this article characterises the unfavourable legal environment faced by self-employed platform workers in Germany. Section three explains the methodology used to collect evidence about the mobilisation of the yoga teachers engaged in the FYI. Section four presents the findings about the possible causes of this mobilisation. Section five outlines the goals and strategies pursued by the FYI to resist the platforms. Section six considers the relevance of the key findings for the field of platform studies.

The findings reveal that the subjective interests of yoga teachers played a role in motivating them to defend their profession from the pressures of valorisation represented by fitness platforms. It appears that gender might have played a part in constructing these subjective interests and thus contributed to the emergence of collective action. Despite challenges posed by an unfavourable legal environment, the yoga teachers effectively leveraged their associational power to influence public discourse about fitness platforms. In the conclusion, I argue that their mobilisation highlights the importance of the rights of self-employed platform workers in the current debates about regulations of platforms.

⁽⁵⁾ C.L. Park, K.E. Riley, E. Bedesin, V.M. Stewart, *Why Practice Yoga? Practitioners’ Motivations for Adopting and Maintaining Yoga Practice*, *Journal of Health Psychology*, 2016, 21, 887.

⁽⁶⁾ K. Hallmann, L. Bogner, K. Sander, K. Reuß, *Sport for a Livelihood and Well-Being: From Leisure Activity to Occupational Devotion*, *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 2022, 5, 1, 67.

⁽⁷⁾ J. Hufnagel, K. Spraul, *Aligning Working in an Organization with Teaching Yoga: An Investigation into Personally Meaningful Work*, *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, 2023, 37, 137.

⁽⁸⁾ S. Schmalz, C. Ludwig, E. Webster, *The Power Resources Approach: Developments and Challenges*, *Global Labour Journal*, 2018, 9, 113.

⁽⁹⁾ L.B. Edelman, M.C. Suchman, *The Legal Environments of Organizations*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1997, 23, 507.

2. Dynamic Legal Environment

The legal environment for platforms operating in the EU is shaped by tensions between two overlapping areas of law. The first area is the German regulations that define the rights of the solo self-employed. The second area is the EU regulations on digital labour platforms, which seek to expand the rights of their self-employed partners. Together, these constitute an unfavourable but dynamically evolving legal environment for collective action of self-employed workers in Germany.

In Germany, independent self-employed workers (*Selbstständiger*) are not covered by labour law and do not have the right to collective bargaining. This right is limited to employees (*Arbeitnehmer*) and employee-like persons (*Arbeitnehmerähnliche Personen*), who are subject to a certain economic dependence⁽¹⁰⁾. Current regulatory debates about the rights of platform workers in the EU, have focused on the distinction between the independent self-employed workers who meet the criteria of ‘genuine self-employment’ and those in ‘bogus self-employment’ (*Scheinselbstständigkeit*), which attempts to disguise what is in fact an employment relationship. In these debates, less attention is paid to platform workers who may in fact meet the legal criteria of ‘genuine self-employment’.

That said, strengthening the rights of the self-employed is the goal of several recent EU regulatory initiatives. The restrictions on the access to collective bargaining for self-employed workers come from the collision with EU competition rules, which treat collective agreements as illegal cartel agreements⁽¹¹⁾. However, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has ruled in a range of cases that collective agreements improving the working conditions and protection of self-employed workers must be considered as pursuing a legitimate objective in the public interest, thereby justifying restrictions to competition law⁽¹²⁾. In 2022, the European Commission has issued guidelines to clarify that the self-employed can get together to collectively negotiate better working conditions without breaching EU competition rules⁽¹³⁾. The Commission declared it would not enforce EU competition rules against collective agreements made by solo self-employed people who are in a weak negotiating position, including those who work through digital labour platforms.

Moreover, in 2024 the EU adopted the Platform Work Directive, which explicitly intends to benefit the genuinely self-employed, defining them as ‘persons performing platform work’⁽¹⁴⁾. The Directive grants rights concerning information about

⁽¹⁰⁾ W. Däubler, *Working People in Germany*, *Comparative Labour Law & Policy Journal*, 1999, 21, 77.

⁽¹¹⁾ I. Schömann, *Collective Bargaining and the Limits of Competition Law: Protecting the Fundamental Labour Rights of Self-Employed Workers*, ETUI Research Paper – Policy Brief, 2022, *SSRN Electronic Journal*, www.ssrn.com/abstract=4031495, accessed 3 November 2024.

⁽¹²⁾ Albany C-67/96, FNV Kunsten C-413/13, Wouters C-309/99, and Pavlov C-180/98 to C-184/98; in Schömann (n 11), 4.

⁽¹³⁾ European Commission, *Guidelines on the application of Union competition law to collective agreements regarding the working conditions of solo self-employed persons 2022/C 374/02*.

⁽¹⁴⁾ European Commission, *Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on improving working conditions in platform work COM/2021/762 final*.

algorithmic management systems to this category of workers. It also opens the door to Member States developing more specific rules concerning their rights and representation ⁽¹⁵⁾. It remains uncertain how lawmakers will transpose these regulations into German law.

Although in Germany the genuinely self-employed do not have the right to collective bargaining, they can join or create organisations dedicated to collective representation of their interests. The union Verdi, which represents workers in the private service sector, has opened its doors to dependent self-employed workers in 2001, but its power of influence remains weak due to low union density of this group of workers ⁽¹⁶⁾. Self-employed workers can also join a professional association (*Berufsverband*), which represents and promotes the interests of a particular profession. In Germany, there are numerous professional associations of yoga teachers with the largest being BDYoga (*Berufsverband der Yogalehrenden in Deutschland*). A professional association falls under the scope of the German Civil Code as a legally registered association (*Eingetragener Verein*). Associations of professionals who pursue joint business operations fall under the scope of the German law on cooperatives (*Genossenschaftsgesetz*).

Importantly, self-employed workers can also create new organisations dedicated to the collective representation of their interests. In this context, the constitutive legal environment, understood as the legal forms and categories that help to define the very nature of organisations and their environments, comes into focus ⁽¹⁷⁾. The fragmented constitutive environment creates an opportunity for self-employed workers to experiment with different legal forms. New organisations can help shape constitutive law, because «the rules, principles, and values that comprise legal forms and categories often arise out of organizational practices and norms» ⁽¹⁸⁾. By experimenting with legal forms, new organisations of self-employed workers can demonstrate their potential and limitations, and inform debates about necessary legal reforms.

3. Case Study of the Fair Yoga Initiative

The goal of the case study of the FYI was to investigate why and how the yoga teachers in Berlin resisted fitness platforms, and to explore the role that the law and gender played for their mobilisation. I assumed that the yoga teachers in this study met the legal criteria of genuine self-employment, because they worked for more than one client. At the time of the study, there were three companies in Berlin which yoga teachers considered ‘fitness platforms’: the German company Urban Sports Club (USC),

⁽¹⁵⁾ Article 15 includes specific arrangements for representatives of self-employed workers; Articles 25 to 28 allows Member States to further specify their rights.

⁽¹⁶⁾ S. Pernicka, *The Evolution of Union Politics for Atypical Employees: A Comparison between German and Austrian Trade Unions in the Private Service Sector*, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 2005, 26, 225.

⁽¹⁷⁾ L.B. Edelman, M.C. Suchman, *The Legal Environments of Organizations*, 507.

⁽¹⁸⁾ L.B. Edelman, M.C. Suchman, *The Legal Environments of Organizations*, 507.

an American company ClassPass, and Gympass from Brazil. The USC reportedly has tens of thousands of members who can join a yoga class offered by hundreds of partners, including yoga studios, fitness centres, and independent teachers ⁽¹⁹⁾.

I collected the data for this study from December 2019 to April 2022 using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. For this purpose, I distributed a link to an online survey between April and July 2020 through the newsletter and social media channels of the FYI. Moreover, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with M, one of the group's initiators, at different phases: in December 2019, before the initiative's creation, in February 2021, at the peak of its activity, and in April 2022, after it had paused its activity. Qualitative data also came from publications in print media, blogs, and the group's social media channels.

The survey yielded responses from 50 yoga teachers from Berlin (N=50), analysed with quantitative methods. Respondents identifying as women constituted the majority of the sample (45), three persons identified as men, one as other, and one left the field blank. The age range of the respondents was from 26 to 65, with an average of 38. The sample included 48% German nationals, as well as non-German nationals from Australia, Austria, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Israel, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, UK, and the US. Most of the respondents had a university degree, including more than half who had at least a master's degree. The respondents had on average seven years of experience teaching yoga, and two thirds (63%) completed 500 or more hours of professional training. It is important to keep in mind that, due to the way of distribution, the survey responses of a particular group of teachers might not be representative of yoga teachers in Berlin.

The qualitative data consisting of survey responses to the open questions, transcribed interview data, and public statements shared in print or digital media underwent coding ⁽²⁰⁾. Regarding qualitative content analysis, I used an inductive approach to discern narrative components in the data and develop categories which adhere to the criteria that emerge from the theoretical background ⁽²¹⁾.

4. Transformation of the Yoga Field During the Pandemic

The findings confirm that the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically transformed the yoga field in Berlin. The first case of Covid-19 in Berlin was reported on March 1, 2020, and on March 14 the local government ordered the closure of all cultural institutions, restaurants, bars, and fitness studios. During the first lockdown many yoga teachers and fitness professionals turned to livestreaming or pre-recording their classes.

⁽¹⁹⁾ J. Frisse, *Urban Sports Club: Aufstand der Ausgeglichenen*, *op. cit.*

⁽²⁰⁾ J. Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, Sage Publications Ltd, 2009.

⁽²¹⁾ P. Mayring, *Qualitative Content Analysis*, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2000, 1, www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1089/2385, accessed 1 November 2024.

4.1 Shift to Online Classes

The survey revealed that the majority of yoga teachers interested in the FYI were women, with tertiary level of education and considerable yoga training and experience. The respondents were a heterogenous group in terms of age and nationality, and non-Germans formed a substantial part of the group. Among the survey respondents only 25% had the experience of teaching an online class before the lockdown, compared to 87% at the time of the survey. Asked if they would continue to teach classes online after the Covid-19 social distancing rules were over, half of them agreed, 20% disagreed, and 30% were neutral.

The survey also uncovered a great range of professional situations of the yoga teachers interested in the FYI. Yoga was the main source of income for only half of the respondents, suggesting that the other half might have held other primary jobs. The average income of the respondents dropped from EUR 952 before the pandemic to EUR 542 at the time of the study. A closer look at the distribution of incomes in this group reveals, however, that before the pandemic there was a wider discrepancy between the lowest and highest earners, but during the lockdown most earned no more than EUR 1500 per month (figure 1).

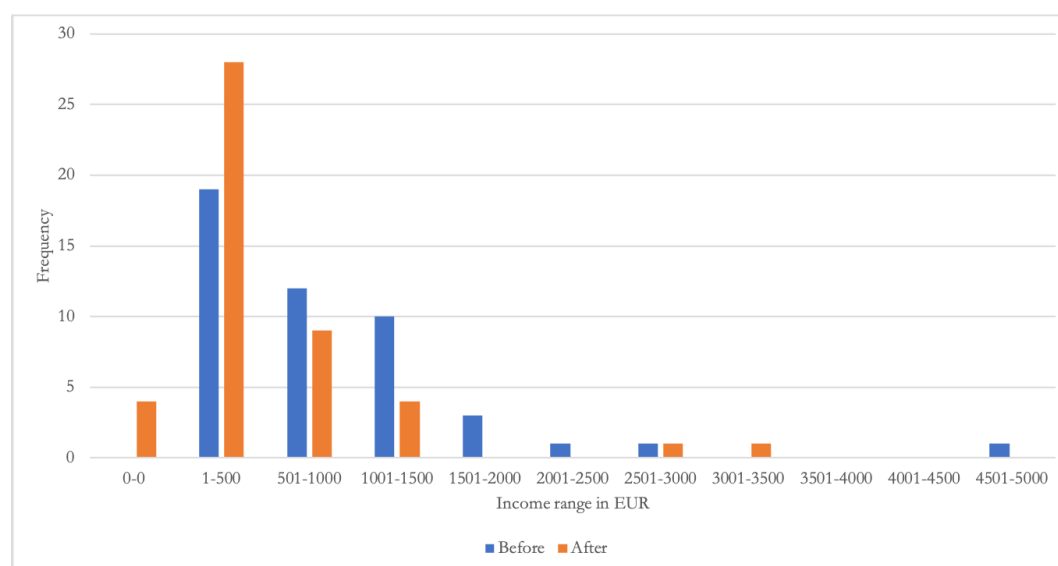


Figure 1. Estimated monthly net income before and after the onset of the pandemic.

Concerning the number of class hours taught per week, thirty teachers indicated that their number had dropped and three stopped working altogether. However, the lockdown had no impact on the number of classes for twelve people, and in six cases that number actually increased. Data concerning the prices charged for yoga classes was harder to interpret, because teachers reported different pricing models in different contexts. cursory analysis suggests that the prices oscillated between EUR 12 and 15

per class before the pandemic but fell in the EUR 5–12 range during the first lockdown. Before the pandemic, students paying directly to their teachers typically paid EUR 150 for ten classes, or EUR 70–90 for a monthly pass.

Asked if their professional situation as a yoga teacher deteriorated following the Covid-19 pandemic, 73% teachers agreed and 17% were neutral. The majority of the respondents to the survey expressed interest in pursuing collective strategies for better working conditions and higher wages. The participation of the teachers who did not experience a deterioration of their professional situation suggests that their interests went beyond concerns with the falling incomes. In fact, as one of them put it in the open question, what worried them was the broader process of the ‘gig-economisation of yoga’.

4.2 Impact of Fitness Platforms

At the time of the study, three fitness platforms sold flat rate membership passes that customers could use to attend online classes offered by yoga teachers. According to press articles, the company which yoga students reportedly used most frequently was Urban Sports Club, founded in Berlin in 2012 ⁽²²⁾. The USC positioned itself as a neutral intermediary helping teachers increase their visibility on the market: «We see ourselves as a bit of a marketing and sales machine for studios. That means the studios get a tremendous amount of new exposure through us», shared one of its directors in the press ⁽²³⁾.

Before the pandemic, the company offered a range of flat rate membership passes, with the cheapest costing EUR 59. During the first lockdown, the membership passes allowed students to participate in an unlimited number of various online classes, including yoga. This was a competitive offer for yoga students in comparison with the monthly passes offered by yoga studios and independent teachers, which cost EUR 70–90 at the time. Many teachers saw the policies of the fitness platforms as a case of ‘price dumping’ which contributed to the downward pressure on the prices for yoga classes. One of the study participants noted: «People are getting used to the extremely cheap prices without necessarily questioning what consequences this has on their favourite studios and teachers».

Moreover, the teachers were increasingly concerned about becoming dependent on the fitness platforms to keep their classes full. Remaining independent from the platforms implied double risk: losing the existing students to the fitness platforms and not attracting new students. One of the teachers in the survey responded: «USC is on my mind quite a lot, as my classes are very poorly attended. That said, those that do come, come regularly and are really engaged. I realise I would have more attendance if

⁽²²⁾ J. Frisse, *Urban Sports Club: Aufstand der Ausgeglichenen*, *op. cit.*

⁽²³⁾ K. Ruskowski, M. Dichmann, *Berliner Yogalehrerinnen gegen große Fitness-Apps*, *Deutschlandfunk Nova*, 6 July 2020, www.deutschlandfunknova.de/beitrag/fair-yoga-initiative-berliner-yogalehrerinnen-und-lehrer-gegen-grosse-fitness-apps, accessed 24 April 2024.

I joined USC, but I also do not want to become dependent on them». Another one lamented in a press article: «We are totally dependent. Almost everyone now comes via Urban Sports. That's frustrating. We only earn about half as much with these students. But if you don't offer the courses via the Urban Sports Club, they remain empty» (24).

The findings suggest that the dissatisfaction with the fitness platforms reached a tipping point with the onset of the pandemic. Among the 32 respondents who were platform partners before the pandemic, 11 quit their cooperation during the first lockdown. Yoga teachers who had experience working through a platform considered the payment offered to them as inadequate (80%), disagreed that they were able to negotiate their prices (63%), and considered communication with the platform difficult (44%). In the open questions, many respondents expressed concerns with the impact of platforms: increased dependency, low pay-outs per students, lack of fair and transparent pay-out policy, devaluation of their work, and impact on the students' behaviour.

A major concern for the yoga teachers was the ability of the fitness platforms to set their payments per student per class (also called 'pay-outs') in a unilateral and non-transparent way. In press articles, the USC representatives insisted that their 'partners' could negotiate their pay-outs individually, and that the different prices relied on the different basic conditions of the teachers and yoga studios, and on the services they offered to the students. However, according to reports, contracts prohibited partners from disclosing information about the agreed pay-outs (25).

The teachers participating in this study revealed that before the pandemic the USC pay-outs oscillated between EUR 7 and 11 per student per class but dropped to about EUR 5 during the first lockdown. For some yoga teachers, these pay-outs were simply too low to make ends meet. As one put it in the survey, «I rent a space at a small studio. With low payment per student and possible class size restrictions due to Covid-19, I don't have enough students per class to make enough money with the low prices Urban Sports Club pays». Lack of fair and transparent pricing policies of fitness platforms contributed to the yoga teachers' insecurity about their livelihoods.

The yoga teachers were concerned not only about the impact of the platforms on their economic situation, but also about the commodification of the teacher-student relationship. The teachers lamented that fitness platforms devalued their work by bundling yoga with other providers of fitness services. However, as one respondent insisted, «yoga is not a sport». Some teachers believed that the flexibility offered by the fitness platforms affected the behaviour of some students. One respondent explained: «I don't like the attitude of many participants that come through platforms (not all!). There is no connection, like a bad one-night stand». Another one complained in a blogpost that lack of long-term commitment misaligned with the spiritual tenets of yoga:

(24) J. Frisse, *Urban Sports Club: Aufstand der Ausgeglichenen*, *op. cit.*

(25) K. Ruskowski, M. Dichmann, *Berliner Yogalehrerinnen gegen große Fitness-Apps*, *op. cit.*

«[I]f you are bouncing around the whole time, going from studio to studio, teacher to teacher, style to style, how are you ever gonna reach any depth? Also, the benefits of yoga very much depend on discipline (*tapas*), dedication and devotion (*isvara-pranidad*) and commitment I also see (and hear about) more students looking at the yoga class as a service being provided, and not like an opportunity for growth and self-study» (26).

The teachers believed that by remaining independent from fitness platforms, they could avoid the pressures of commodification of their relationship with students. This required connecting with students directly through independent marketing efforts:

«Those who were already doing quite a lot of their own marketing efforts—like genuine marketing effort, not selling for the purpose of selling, but really wanting to stay in touch with their students and offer them things that were useful—have realized that they can actually do quite well, that they don't need the crazy numbers that were required with those platforms» (M, interview, February 2021).

However, this strategy required marketing skills which some teachers might have not assumed to be essential elements of the yoga profession. As M concluded, «not every single yoga teacher signed up to be an IT person, not everyone is either cut out or signed up to be a marketing person».

The advent of the fitness platforms exposed the vulnerability of the self-employed teachers at the mercy of an increasingly competitive market. It was a general belief that free online offer on digital platforms such as YouTube reduced the willingness of potential yoga students to pay for classes. Fitness platforms contributed to the competition by restricting access to their online marketplace to selected partners. The ability to control access to their market became even more obvious when, during the second lockdown, the USC announced that it would select 150 partners allowed to offer yoga classes on their platform (27).

The new market reality marked by increased competition forced some actors to exit the field entirely. As M observed in February 2021,

«I do think that the industry here in Berlin is not going to be the same that it was before, simply because lots of people will have made the choice to leave the profession, or the city as a matter of fact, and because some studios either already closed or they're very close to filing for bankruptcy».

(26) V. Larsson, *The Slut Pass Is Killing Me*, www.swanmountain.co, 30 November 2019, www.swanmountain.co/post/the-slut-pass-is-killing-me, accessed 6 November 2024.

(27) FYI Instagram account, 29 October 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CG7uWYQDm8M, accessed 6 November 2024.

Some of the teachers who remained dedicated to teaching yoga saw raising their voice as a professional group as a necessity to defend their collective interests against fitness platforms.

5. Goals and Strategies of the Fair Yoga Initiative

Yoga teachers in Berlin mobilised to defend their collective interests by forming a new organisation. In this section, I present the goals and strategies of the FYI based mainly on the findings from the interviews with one of its founders and from the group's social media channels.

The first interview with M took place face-to-face in December 2019. At the time, M revealed that she would like to mobilise the network she established through regular yoga teacher meetings and create an organisation dedicated to resisting the power of fitness platforms. During the second phone interview in February 2021, she reckoned that the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was a tipping point for this mobilisation:

«We couldn't really find the critical mass that was willing to take action for a very long time until the crisis hit and until the undue influence of those platforms became so damaging, and so clearly damaging, that people were willing to take a step and basically risk the comfort that they had gained for long-term benefits» (Interview with M, February 2021).

At the onset of the pandemic, a group of about dozen teachers came together and joined M. The group comprised mostly women and one man, including both German and foreign nationals. They communicated in English and German. Due to social distancing restrictions, the group could only meet online and kept in touch over the phone and messaging applications. They had no formal hierarchy, agreed on decisions through consensus, and allocated tasks according to the members' interests and competences.

What motivated M to establish the group was the «desire to create a more open conversation» about the yoga profession. In her opinion, the contradictory dynamics between yoga as a philosophy and an industry could have prevented these conversations in the past:

«It's an unregulated industry of self-employed people who are pretty friendly with each other. But many topics are not discussed or addressed, because they are uncomfortable, or because people just don't have the knowledge required to have those conversations in a way that is helpful or doesn't feel kind of confusing or threatening. We are an industry where what sells is being nice and polished, so lots of conversations are not happening, because they're uncomfortable; it kind of doesn't suit that image we

should be portraying. So, we found that very problematic, because we saw a discrepancy between the yoga industry and the yoga practice and philosophy. And there are lots of places where those things clash, and they create situations that generate either abuses of power by successful people, or corporate greed of some yoga corporations that then abuse those who represent them, and offer very unfair work conditions» (Interview with M, February 2021).

The disillusionment with the development of yoga into an industry acted as a resource for mobilising the teachers, but M saw the challenge in aligning the principles of yoga practice with the political logic of collective action. She perceived her role as a broker between the two logics:

«Our aim is to really address power imbalances overall in our industry and all sorts of possible abuses that come from those power imbalances. Therefore, it is political I really see it as part of my work to bring those things together. And I think that is one of the things that we want to do with our organization—not necessarily to change the world, but at least to make sure that the environment in which people teach and practice has enough checks and balances, and open, honest conversations, so that people can practice or can teach regardless of who they are, regardless of ethnicity, sex, gender, body shape» (Interview with M, February 2021).

For M, one of the main goals of the FYI was to bring the isolated teachers together during a time marked by a rapid transformation and nourish a sense of collectivity:

«My hope is that we understand that there is a need for us to come together much more, rather than playing the lone wolf strategy that has been the main strategy so far. That we studio teachers come together and try to find collective, collaborative solutions, because we will have to, if we want to survive as an overall industry. Because I think we're going to have to deal with the digital component for a very long time, if not forever» (Interview with M, February 2021).

The primary strategy to resist the platforms was to bring yoga teachers together and build associational power by creating an organisational structure which reconciled the underlying structural conditions and the interests of its members ⁽²⁸⁾. The fact that the fitness platforms posed a threat to the teachers' autonomy served to justify the need for collective action:

⁽²⁸⁾ S. Schmalz, C. Ludwig, E. Webster, *The Power Resources Approach: Developments and Challenges*, *op. cit.*, 120.

«My big hope is that people really do see that, with a little bit of work, it is possible to be a lot more autonomous from market forces. And that, therefore, it is possible to rely on your own capacities and not to expect that you are a passive actor who accepts conditions that are put to you. And I think quite a few of us have understood that» (Interview with M, February 2021).

Difficulties experienced by individual members as a result of Covid-19 made the need for mutual care within the organisation ever so evident:

«Under the current circumstances ... I think people are borderline exhausted and everybody's dealing with some form of mild emotional backlash, psychological challenges to themselves or to somebody close to them. The capacities to do things are pretty restricted. So, it has also been a lot for us about managing our expectations of one another, our expectations of our organization and making sure we care for one another in our small kind of group in a very human manner, and accept that we might have certain deadlines that we can't quite keep» (Interview with M, February 2021).

In M's opinion, the collective action of yoga teachers was a way to show that surviving in the industry can involve breaking isolation and cooperating more. The group following grew quickly and by the summer of 2020 there were about 200 yoga teachers subscribed to the group's newsletter.

The second strategy was to raise collective concerns directly to the representatives of the fitness platforms. However, the USC leaderships reportedly dismissed the FYI as a vocal minority. Representing only a sliver of the platform's partners, the group commanded little structural power to bargain collectively ⁽²⁹⁾. In M's opinion, the fitness platforms took advantage of the crisis situation to create contractual conditions that were even more in their favour. The FYI also held discussions with several partners who wanted to build alternative solutions for marketing and intermediating yoga classes with the view to implementing fair and transparent conditions for yoga teachers. These efforts failed, because the new actors lacked a large client base to effectively compete with the fitness platforms.

In the absence of structural power, the FYI drew on its ability to represent their interests through public support. This strategy based on societal power ⁽³⁰⁾ consisted primarily in addressing students directly through social media and indirectly through press articles. In summer 2020, the FYI launched the 'Reclaim' campaign on social media with the main image entitled «yogis who do the right thing», which portrayed two younger white women, an older white woman, as well as two men of colour. The

⁽²⁹⁾ S. Schmalz, C. Ludwig, E. Webster, *The Power Resources Approach: Developments and Challenges*, *op. cit.*, 116–118.

⁽³⁰⁾ *ibid* 122–124; D. Però, J. Downey, *Advancing Workers' Rights in the Gig Economy through Discursive Power: The Communicative Strategies of Indie Unions*, *Work, Employment and Society*, 2022, 38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095001702211031>, accessed 6 November 2024.

campaign relied on a contrast between two discursive frames: one referring to ‘platform capitalism’ and another to ‘conscious consumers’. The contrast between the two frames was prominent in the image portraying the dark forces of platform capitalism protruding from the bottom, including the ‘world’s biggest online store’, ‘soulless international coffee chain’, ‘your ubiquitous fast fashion chain’, and ‘price-dumping fitness apps’. Against the white background on the top, the positive actors included the ‘neighbourhood bookshop’, ‘super cute indie café’, ‘vintage clothing shops’, and ‘local, indie yoga studios’.

The goal of the campaign was to address the yoga students directly as ‘conscious consumers’, willing to support ‘fair’ practices in the fitness industry. The campaign explicitly tackled the tension inherent in portraying yoga students as consumers: «We know we’d rather be ‘pure consciousness’ than a conscious consumer, but hey, we gotta start somewhere». Although the emphasis on individual choice of ‘fair’ products or services, popularised by the alter-globalisation movement, often implicitly draws on guilt, the yoga teachers stressed that they did not want to blame the students ⁽³¹⁾.

As M reckoned, this discursive strategy succeeded in drawing some students away from the fitness platforms and sparked the interest of potential key allies. Representatives of the FYI received invitations to speak about their situation from the Federal Ministry of Labour, local politicians, the Berlin board of commerce, the trade union Verdi, and a cooperative which helps self-employed persons gain better access to health insurance and social security benefits. The BDYoga, the largest professional association of yoga teachers in Germany, also noticed the FYI’s efforts. In February 2021, M concluded: «For a really small team, I think we can be very proud of what we’ve done so far».

Building on coalition power with more powerful institutional actors was important given that as an organisation of self-employed workers, the FYI had limited institutional power on their own. The initiators of the group believed that they could strengthen the legitimacy of their efforts by becoming a formal and legally recognised organisation. The group hesitated between two legal forms: a cooperative (*Genossenschaft*) and a legally registered association (*Eingetragener Verein*), ultimately opting for the latter. It took over a year for the group to fulfil the legal requirements, such as drafting a statute, formalising membership rules, electing a board of representatives, and registering as an association with the court. Although in early 2021, the FYI achieved the legal status, in November 2024 it announced on social media that it was pausing its activities. The final newsletter signed by five members read: «We are proud that we managed to shift people’s awareness, and force some of the app players to make some U-turns. Our little crew realised it had reached the limit of its current capacities, especially doing this work on a voluntary basis».

⁽³¹⁾ J. Frisse, *Urban Sports Club: Aufstand der Ausgeglichener*, *op. cit.*

According to M, the reasons for the decline of the FYI stem from a mix of internal and external factors. Due to social distancing restrictions, meetings could only take place online and it was challenging to attract new members. As M noted,

«the yoga community is overall a pretty nice and friendly bunch, but it can stay pretty superficial, because people are busy and have lots of things to deal with by themselves. It has been a challenge to find people who are willing to be engaged and kind of grow our ranks in terms of not just being a member, but an active member doing things» (Interview with M, February 2021).

During the final phone interview in April 2022, M acknowledged that the process of becoming an association consumed much time and energy that the group could have used for networking. The group's resources, based on volunteer work, began to shrink after three members left for personal reasons and the remaining ones could only commit their time punctually. As M concluded, «we failed to recruit new people, and three fourths of the original team was gone, we simply did not have the capacity It was painful, but we decided that in order to continue we would need more coherency and consistency, especially vis a vis partners such as Verdi or the Federal Ministry of Labour» (Interview with M, April 2022). For M, the formalisation of the group highlighted the gap between the activist desire and the bureaucratic reality, but it is not known how other members assessed this process.

Despite the group's decline, the FYI's initiators believed that their efforts broke ground for future collective action of yoga teachers. In their final email in December 2021, they wrote: «We continue to believe that the yoga community can and must thrive outside of the platform economy, and we hope to (re)connect with you in different ways soon». Indeed, the mobilisation of yoga teachers in Berlin is a powerful example that collective action of self-employed professionals is possible even in the context of a heterogenous and fragmented workforce facing an unfavourable legal environment.

6. Discussion of the Findings

6.1 Threat to Subjective Interests as a Trigger for Mobilisation

The findings suggest that the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was an 'exogenous shock' which destabilised the entire yoga field ⁽³²⁾. Exogenous shocks can develop into 'episodes of contention' during which emergent actors use new and innovative forms of action vis-a-vis one another ⁽³³⁾. This mobilisation led by the FYI is an example of

⁽³²⁾W.H. Sewell, *Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille, Theory and Society*, 1996, 25, 841.

⁽³³⁾ D. McAdam, *Legacies of Anti-Americanism: A Sociological Perspective*, in P.J. Katzenstein and R.O. Keohane (eds), *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, Cornell University Press, 2007, 253.

an episode of contention, during which self-employed workers tested new forms of collective action against platforms.

The findings confirm that the majority of yoga teachers who mobilised against fitness platforms experienced a deterioration of their professional situation during the first lockdown. They attributed this deterioration partly to the role that fitness platforms played in intermediating their digital labour, in particular the downward pressure on yoga prices. The discontent with the platforms reached a tipping point when one of the platforms lowered the pay-outs for yoga teachers. However, the involvement of the yoga teachers who were not platform partners and the teachers who felt satisfied with their financial situation suggests that the motivation for resisting fitness platforms went beyond the interests in securing one's livelihood.

Indeed, the study revealed that yoga teachers shared a perception that fitness platforms pressured them into valorisation, which posed a threat to their subjective interests as a professional group. Subjective interests, which go beyond the reproductive interests in securing one's livelihood and maintaining one's work capacity, can also be an important source of stress and conflict ⁽³⁴⁾. The study revealed that some yoga teachers feared that becoming increasingly dependent on the platforms would pose a challenge to their professional autonomy. Moreover, they perceived the fitness platforms as responsible for the commodification of the relationship between yoga teachers and their students, seen as a threat to the spiritual tenets of yoga and the relationship between teachers and students. It appears that this perceived threat to the subjective interests of yoga teachers was one of the triggers for resistance against the platforms.

In interpreting the results of this study, it is important to remember that despite its heterogeneity in terms of age and nationality, the mobilised group consisted mainly of well-educated and experienced teachers. The study did not investigate the perceptions about fitness platforms among the wider group of yoga teachers. It is possible that some teachers saw the platform model as neutral or even positive. For example, teachers new to the profession or to the city might have viewed it as a useful tool in finding new students. Further research could explore how different factors affect the perception of platforms among yoga teachers and more broadly, fitness professionals.

Moreover, we need further research to establish whether and how fitness platforms rely on algorithmic management and how this impacts the working conditions of their partners. Platform workers face numerous challenges in confronting different types of platforms, including workforce heterogeneity and fragmentation ⁽³⁵⁾. However, prior research indicates that self-employed workers can overcome these challenges

⁽³⁴⁾ S. Nies, *Subjective Work Interests and Dissent: Inequalities in Contesting Pressures of Valorisation*, in A. Kupfer (ed), *Work Appropriation and Social Inequality*, Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2021, 27.

⁽³⁵⁾ D. della Porta, R.E Chesta, L. Cini, *Labour Conflicts in the Digital Age: A Comparative Perspective*, Bristol University Press, 2022.

relying on traditional and new forms of workers' voice ⁽³⁶⁾. This study contributes to the understanding of the role that subjective interests of professional groups can play in this process. Further research should consider if, why, and how self-employed workers who work off platforms resist them to defend their professional interests.

6.2 Gender Perspective on Mobilisations in Feminised Professions

The mobilisation of the yoga teachers in Berlin is an interesting case study for exploring the role of gender for mobilisation in feminised professions. Past research has confirmed the prevalence of women among yoga teachers in Germany and more broadly in the Western world ⁽³⁷⁾. Relatively little research has covered mobilisations against platforms in other feminised sectors, such as care and domestic work ⁽³⁸⁾. This section explores in detail how the role of gender in constructing the subjective interests of yoga teachers might have contributed to the emergence of collective action.

Past research suggests that one of important motivators for women to pursue yoga as a profession is spirituality ⁽³⁹⁾. Yoga might have drawn women because its image presents it as a spiritual practice used to modify the self and gain control and power in other arenas of their lives ⁽⁴⁰⁾. Some women in this study appeared concerned that fitness platforms deprived yoga of the spiritual elements by bundling it with other types of physical activity and affecting the student behaviour. «Yoga is not a sport» succinctly summarises the sentiment that yoga is a unique spiritual practice that needs protection from the pressures of commodification represented by platforms.

Another important aspect motivating women to teach yoga is that it involves caring for others, which they see as an important part of a yoga teacher's job ⁽⁴¹⁾. Past research suggests that having a positive impact on actual human beings is what makes the job of yoga teacher meaningful ⁽⁴²⁾. It appears that the pursuit of yoga as a profession corresponds to the socially constructed image of women as caregivers. However, unlike care or domestic work, the work of yoga teachers does not proceed in social isolation; building a sense of community within yoga classes and venues, and receiving inspiration

⁽³⁶⁾ H. Heiland, *Workers' Voice in Platform Labour: An Overview*, WSI Study, 21, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut (WSI), Düsseldorf, 2020, <https://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:101:1-2020102613561185731705>, accessed 6 November 2024.

⁽³⁷⁾ C. Fuchs, *Yoga in Deutschland*, *op. cit.*; C.L. Park, K.E. Riley, E. Bedesin, V.M. Stewart, *Why Practice Yoga? Practitioners' Motivations for Adopting and Maintaining Yoga Practice*, *op. cit.*; A.H. Tung, *Female Yoga Teachers' Motivators for Teaching and Engaging in Yoga*, University of Guelph, 2022, 95, <https://hdl.handle.net/10214/26988>, accessed 23 October 2024

⁽³⁸⁾ For exceptions see V. Niebler - S. Animento, *Organising Fragmented Labour: The Case of Migrant Workers at Helping in Berlin*, *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 2023, 34, 4, 689.

⁽³⁹⁾ C.L. Park, K.E. Riley, E. Bedesin, V.M. Stewart, *Why Practice Yoga? Practitioners' Motivations for Adopting and Maintaining Yoga Practice*, *op. cit.*

⁽⁴⁰⁾ S. Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, Routledge, 2020, 78.

⁽⁴¹⁾ A.M. Peticca-Harris, *Exploring the Identities of North American Yoga Teachers from Different Perspectives on the Self*, York University, 2016, 95, <http://hdl.handle.net/10315/32716>, accessed 23 October 2024.

⁽⁴²⁾ J. Hufnagel, K. Spraul, *Aligning Working in an Organization with Teaching Yoga* *cit.*

from other yoga teachers helps them to stay motivated ⁽⁴³⁾. The concern that platforms have a negative impact on their ability to build meaningful relationships with students, and more broadly on yoga as a community, was important for some teachers in this study.

What could also contribute to women choosing to become a yoga teacher is that they can pursue it as self-employed workers, a form of employment, which is often associated with greater autonomy and flexibility ⁽⁴⁴⁾. Women might choose to teach yoga part-time to reconcile it with another job in an organisation ⁽⁴⁵⁾, or with caregiving responsibilities ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Moreover, teaching yoga may attract women as a form of ‘lifestyle entrepreneurship’ in pursuit of a higher quality of life ⁽⁴⁷⁾. In this context, the self-employed female yoga teachers might have seen fitness platforms as a threat to their autonomy and flexibility, which made yoga an attractive profession in the first place.

This study did not investigate in detail the yoga teachers’ motivations to pursue this profession, but the evidence confirms that spirituality, caring for others, and a sense of community and autonomy contributed to why they saw it as meaningful. Research about resistance against platforms could explore in more detail the role gender plays in the process of social construction of meaning attributed to different professions. This gender-sensitive approach could contribute to understanding the possibilities and challenges of collective action in other feminised professions, similarly affected by the advent of platforms.

6.3 Legal Environments and New Worker Organisations

Self-employed platform workers face an unfavourable legal environment, which restricts the structural and institutional power at their disposal. However, as the case of yoga teachers demonstrates, even without the right to collective bargaining, self-employed workers can build associative power and alert society to the challenges posed by platforms.

It might appear paradoxical that an organisation of yoga teachers emerged during the time of increased social isolation, but another group of workers in Berlin at the quick-commerce platform Gorillas also mobilised at a similar time ⁽⁴⁸⁾. The Gorillas

⁽⁴³⁾ A.H. Tung, *Female Yoga Teachers’ Motivators for Teaching and Engaging in Yoga*, *op. cit.*, 95.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ M. Tammelin, M. Salin, K. Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta, *Combining Work and Family: The Self-Employed between Autonomy and Work Demand*, in W. Conen, E. Reuter (eds.), *Research Handbook on Self-Employment and Public Policy*, 2024, 118.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ J. Hufnagel, K. Spraul, *Aligning Working in an Organization with Teaching Yoga* *cit.*

⁽⁴⁶⁾ A.M. Peticca-Harris, *Exploring the Identities of North American Yoga Teachers from Different Perspectives on the Self*, *op. cit.*, 100.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ K. Hallmann, L. Bogner, K. Sander, K. Reuß, *Sport for a Livelihood and Well-Being: From Leisure Activity to Occupational Devotion*, *op. cit.*

⁽⁴⁸⁾ B. Orth, *Riders United Will Never Be Divided?: A Cautionary Tale of Disrupting the Platformization of Urban Space*, in A. Strüver and S. Bauriedl (eds.), *Platformization of Urban Life: Towards a Technocapitalist Transformation of European Cities*, 2022, transcript Verlag 2022, 185.

workers first formed a collective, which later evolved into a works council (*Betriebsrat*), a legal form for collective representation. The yoga teachers also organised themselves as an informal group at first and later evolved into a legal form of a registered association. What these two cases have in common is that in the early phases, these workers resorted to an organising style which involves flat hierarchy, open membership, and consensus-based decision-making⁽⁴⁹⁾. The quick decline of both organisations prompts important questions about the challenges inherent to the process of formalisation into legal entities. Some yoga teachers in this study found this process time-consuming and overly bureaucratic, but understanding factors that led to the group's decline would require more in-depth ethnographic research. Such research should account for the interaction between external and internal factors for the sustainability of new forms of worker organisations⁽⁵⁰⁾.

The case illustrates the importance of constitutive legal environments for the new worker organisations. The Gorillas workers were the platform's employees, so they had access to the full range of collective labour rights, including the right to form a works council and the right to collective bargaining. The challenges they faced in exercising these rights sparked important debates about the promises and limits of the German labour law for employed platform workers⁽⁵¹⁾. In a similar vein, the mobilisation of the FYI directs attention to the challenges faced by self-employed workers. Critically, lack of collective bargaining rights limited their ability to negotiate with the platform, which could have harmed their chances to recruit new members.

Having faced these limitations, the FYI resorted to their societal power to gain public support. Research about 'indie unions' in the UK suggested that considering discursive power-building practices can help us understand better how disenfranchised and highly precarious labour actors can strengthen their chances of success⁽⁵²⁾. The yoga teachers reached out directly to students by asking them to reject digital capitalism in favour of conscious consumerism. Their strategies drew attention of the key players in their field, the local and national policymakers, and actors interested in collective representation of self-employed workers. The FYI is an example how even small and short-lived episodes of collective action can alert the society about new challenges posed by platforms.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ E. Kocher, J. Bronowicka, *Kampf und Offenheit – Wie muss eine Gewerkschaft organisiert sein?* *Kritische Justiz*, 2024, 4.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ I. Ness, *The Chimera of New Forms of Worker Organisation: Why Trade Unions Matter in Rebuilding National and Global Labour Movements*, *Work in the Global Economy*, 2023, 3, 2, 225–242.

⁽⁵¹⁾ I. Hensel, *When Gorillas Strike: Constitutional Protection of Non-Market-Institutions in Labor Law*, *Zeitschrift für Rechtssoziologie*, 2024, 44, 141; E. Kocher, J. Bronowicka, *Kampf und Offenheit* cit.

⁽⁵²⁾ D. Però, J. Downey, *Advancing Workers' Rights in the Gig Economy through Discursive Power* cit.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I analysed why and how self-employed yoga teachers mobilised to defend their subjective interests and resist the impact of fitness platforms on their professional field. I demonstrated that legal environment restricts the capacity of self-employed workers to enter into collective bargaining with the platforms. National labour market regulations, which allow platforms to engage workers without establishing traditional employment relationships, affect how platforms adapt their organisational models to the specific local context ⁽⁵³⁾. But new organisations of platform workers can play a critical role in testing the limits of the national laws. As the case of yoga teachers demonstrates, mobilisations can also help uncover gaps in law that create barriers to collective organisation of certain categories of workers.

The first gap concerns the applicability of the EU regulations to the fitness platforms. The findings suggest that fitness platforms function as market organisers, which control workers' access to external markets, tasks, and contracts ⁽⁵⁴⁾. However, further research would be necessary to establish if fitness platforms rely on algorithmic management to collect information on the workers' activities and structure their behaviour through feedback systems ⁽⁵⁵⁾. It is also worth considering if fitness platforms fall under the scope of the Platform Work Directive as 'digital labour platforms' by providing a service which «involves, as a necessary and essential component, the organisation of work performed by individuals, irrespective of whether that work is performed online or in a certain location» ⁽⁵⁶⁾. If so, workers engaged by fitness platforms could benefit from the rights granted to 'persons performing platform work'. Moreover, one should further explore how other EU regulations, such as the Platform to Business (P2B) Regulation, the Digital Services Act, or the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act apply to fitness platforms, and what implications these regulations have for the rights of their customers and partners.

The second gap concerns the collective rights of the self-employed workers in Germany and other EU countries. The transposition of the Platform Work Directive can be an opportunity to review the national regulations and look for creative solutions that strengthen the collective rights of self-employed platform workers. In line with the EU guidelines, Germany could extend the right to collective bargaining beyond the economically dependent 'employee-like persons' to include all self-employed persons who work for platforms. However, evidence from Poland suggests that even when self-employed persons obtain collective bargaining rights, they still face an uphill struggle

⁽⁵³⁾ G.F. Davis, A. Sinha, *Varieties of Uberization: How Technology and Institutions Change the Organization(s) of Late Capitalism*, *Organization Theory*, 2021, 2, 1.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ E. Kocher, *Digital Work Platforms at the Interface of Labour Law: Regulating Market Organisers*, Hart Publishing, 2022, 156.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ *ibid* 165.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ Article 2 (1), Platform Work Directive (n 14).

(⁵⁷). Removing barriers to collective organisation of self-employed workers through concrete guarantees for workers and trade unions is critical for enabling workers and holding platforms accountable (⁵⁸). As the case of yoga teachers from Berlin shows, new organisations can put a spotlight on the rights of a specific category of workers and help to shape law in their favour.

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(⁵⁷) Ł. Pisarczyk, *Uphill Struggle: Collective Bargaining for the Self-Employed in Poland*, *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 2023, 29, 475.

(⁵⁸) E. Kocher, *Digital Work Platforms at the Interface of Labour Law* cit., 217.

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