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► Delivery work during a pandemic: delivery platform workers in Argentina

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The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital revolution and intensified many of the transformations that the world of work in Argentina had been experiencing in recent years, such as the emergence of digital platforms and new forms of work associated with this phenomenon.

As a consequence of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, on 20 March 2020 Argentina's national government decreed complete social, preventive and mandatory isolation. The mandatory closure of many physical shops and the wariness in society due to the possibility of infection from exposure to contact with other people led consumers to throw themselves into e-commerce. The resulting increase in online ordering created a growth opportunity for courier and delivery work through digital platforms, an activity that was also deemed to be essential and was therefore not interrupted.

On the one hand, the increase in unemployment and the lack of opportunities turned work on digital platforms into an attractive sector, given the few obstacles to getting started in this activity. Yet on the other hand, new risks arose, including not only an exacerbation of the labour precariousness of these workers but also the possibility that they could become infected by the virus. The frequent contacts with product suppliers and customers and other contacts that can take place when moving about the streets means that the likelihood of becoming infected is greater for these workers than for the rest of the population that is not moving about or that only does so occasionally. In fact, nearly two thirds of those interviewed expressed fear of becoming infected.

This study presents the results of a survey of workers in the sector conducted by the ILO in July 2020, and it compares the findings with those obtained from one year before.

The results of the survey conducted of delivery platform workers in the middle of the pandemic show that there was a 15 per cent increase in deliveries per workday with respect to the preceding year and that the wait times between orders consequently dropped, which meant a decrease in the non-remunerated time per workday. Workers also shortened their workdays by nearly one hour on average. This decrease in work time could have been the result of not only the fact that couriers required fewer hours of work to complete a certain number of deliveries (and therefore to reach a certain income), but also the advisability of being on the street fewer hours at a time when COVID-19 was spreading intensely. Nevertheless, the weekly hours worked by couriers on average continued to be very high in 2020.

The average income of couriers dropped in real terms in 2020, as it also did for all registered wage earners as a whole. And the drop in income could have been greater still had it not been for the increase in tips as a proportion of income. The differences in income among different groups of workers observed in 2019 remained the same in 2020. Thus, income was higher among those who worked more hours and made more deliveries, meaning males, migrants, those who used a motorcycle as their main vehicle and those who had over six months of experience in the activity.

Within this context of exposure to the risk of infection, and even though the majority of companies provided their couriers with products for free, such as masks and hand sanitizer, the response by companies was nevertheless limited, given that scarcely any of these products were actually handed out. In fact, 87 per cent of the respondents stated that they personally had to purchase some of the products for use while performing their job. Companies also failed to facilitate access to clean bathrooms, a particularly critical situation during the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, 90 per

cent of workers declared having received training on risk prevention, mainly written and video instructions on using masks, social distancing and hygiene measures.

Despite the high risk of infection faced by couriers, the activity was one of the few ones with jobs that could be accessed by people in search of employment, given the particular conditions caused by the pandemic. More than half of the respondents indicated a lack of job opportunities as the main reason for beginning to work in this activity. In 2019, that same reason for joining the sector was the main one for only 40 per cent of the surveyed workers, with half of the workers in 2019 indicating that the main reason was the flexibility offered by the activity.

The impact of the pandemic on the working conditions and on the safety of delivery platform workers has meant that all social agents in the sector have had to implement measures and take actions. In this regard, there are a notable number of legislative procedures and new bills designed to regulate work on digital platforms. Specifically, on 16 July 2020 the Legislature of Buenos Aires approved Act 6314, which amends the provisions of the Traffic and Transport Code, thereby making the activity of delivery platforms compatible with the transportation legislation of Buenos Aires. The Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security has also presented a draft bill, which places couriers under the protection of labour and social security law.

At the same time, delivery platforms in Argentina have also adopted several measures for adapting to the changes that have taken place in the sector. In addition to information and training actions for workers related to safety measures and risk prevention, platforms have adapted and established new protocols according to which the activity is performed, designed to minimize courier contact with customers. Moreover, some platforms have established forms of coverage for illness to support the income of workers in the event that they are unable to perform their professional activity.

Platform workers have also responded to their current situation, mainly through strategies of collective action. Thus, various domestic protests have been observed, coordinated internationally and organized to raise awareness about the labour situation of these workers and claim their rights within the current context.

The situation of couriers during the pandemic even more clearly highlights the implications of their scarce access to social protection. Consequently, the absence of any minimum income means that these workers have to work a certain number of hours, and it prevents the use of procedures such as job rotation for the purpose of minimizing infection. The lack of coverage for occupational illness also complicates the ability of couriers to earn adequate income if they have to stop working due to becoming infected. In fact, the relatively high proportion of surveyed couriers – somewhat over 20 per cent – who received the Emergency Family Income (IFE) is a clear sign of the vulnerability of this work and of the low income it generates.

Consequently, mechanisms that ensure greater protection for courier workers must be expanded, and a broad discussion involving all stakeholders must be promoted so that suitable regulations can be established through a process of social dialogue. Regulation of the sector should also be accompanied by other actions, such as the adaptation of social security mechanisms so that they effectively cover couriers, the provision of universal labour guarantees and the recognition of the right to organize, the right of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

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NOTICE

The use of language that does not discriminate or mark differences between men and women is one of the concerns of our Organization. However, there is no agreement among linguists about how to do so in Spanish. In this regard and in order to avoid the graphic overload that would be meant by using “o/a” (male/female gender markers in Spanish), we have opted to use the classic generic masculine marker in the Spanish version, thereby understanding that all mentions in such gender always represent both men and women

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