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2022-11-15

Southern Centre For Inequality Studies (SCIS)

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/33456

Atzeni, M. and Kenny, B. 2021. The labour process and workers' rights at Mercado Libre: hiding exploitation through regulation in the digital economy . Future of Work(ers) SCIS Working Paper Number 31, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University Of The Witwatersrand.

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The Future of Work(ers) Research Project
SCIS Working Paper | Number 31

The labour process and workers' rights at Mercado Libre: hiding exploitation through regulation in the digital economy

Maurizio Atzeni and Bridget Kenny | *July 2022*

FORD FOUNDATION
FUTURE OF WORK(ERS)
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Acknowledgements:

Bridget Kenny would like to thank Claire Ceruti and Terri Maggott for research assistance. She would also like to thank James Hodge, Lynford Dor, and Tazlin Maasdorp for their time, insights and discussion.

About the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies:

The Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS) is the first research institute of its kind in the global South. It draws on the intellectual resources of the University of the Witwatersrand and partner institutions in South Africa and beyond, to host an interdisciplinary research and policy project focused on understanding and addressing inequality in the global South.

The Future of Work(ers) Research Project explores how digital technologies are reshaping the world of work and the impact of these changes on inequality. It conceives of the development and application of digital technologies as a contested terrain. It is particularly interested in how collectives of workers are shaping which digital technologies are developed, how and to what end; and the economic and social policies that have been leveraged in response.

The Future of Work(ers) Research Project is supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Ford Foundation and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, South Africa.

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Recommended Citation:

Atzeni, M. and Kenny, B. 2021. The labour process and workers' rights at Mercado Libre: hiding exploitation through regulation in the digital economy . Future of Work(ers) SCIS Working Paper Number 31, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, Wits University. Doi: 10.54223/uniwitwatersrand-10539-33456

Abstract:

In this working paper we consider the case of Mercado Libre in Argentina, the largest e-commerce platform there and in Latin America. E-commerce is, most basically, the sale or purchase of goods or services over the internet (Goga and Paelo, 2019: 2). E-commerce platforms such as, most famously, Amazon use digitalised control systems in warehousing and distribution services. We examine how such digitalised labour processes impact upon the quality and protection of labour in warehousing, and how regulation and trade unions' practices combine to represent workers in these new sectors of the economy. Based on the Argentinian experience, we found that workers' jobs were fragmented, with high use of labour broking. The workforce was overwhelmingly young and temporary. It was the combination of algorithmic management with discretionary human management which imposed stressful working conditions on workers required to negotiate daily conditions, often with negative implications for health and safety. Yet the image of the firm and its reliance on young workers mediated experiences of working there for many. In addition, high turnover relieved some grievances through workers exiting. Still, the Argentinian case also suggests the key potential role of trade unions in the sector to protect workers, given the regulatory context of labour rights and sectoral representation. However, we suggest, this was not an automatic condition of institutionalised regulatory frameworks. Indeed, the recognised union served to buffer management from workers' complaints while the more militant transport workers' union fought to organise warehouse workers more meaningfully. We conceive this study of labour process dynamics and collective issues in Argentina as a way of generating 'lessons' for worker organising and trade union mobilisation in South Africa and more broadly in the global South, which we discuss in the conclusion. We also conceive of this research as the first leg of a broader comparative research agenda on labour relations in Argentina and South Africa to be jointly developed in the future.

Key words: E-commerce platforms, Argentina, digitalised labour process, collective resistance, Global South

Introduction

Research on labour and working conditions in digital platforms and, broadly speaking, the gig economy has expanded in recent years. This growth has been coupled with the algorithmic logic shaping the labour process of platform mediated work (Barratt et al., 2020; Gandini, 2019; Veen et al., 2020), to show the conditions of extreme precariousness suffered by workers employed in the sector (Delfanti 2021; Wood et al., 2019), but also how workers have been able to build incipient forms of collective organisation in such adverse contexts (Cant and Woodcock 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). Much of this research has been primarily concerned with cases of digital platforms employing workers in the passenger transport and food delivery sectors located, mainly, in cities of the global North, and includes reflections on trade union involvement.

Analyses taking examples from the global South are now starting to emerge (Anwar and Graham, 2019; Chinguno, 2019; Ford and Honan, 2019; Frey, 2020; Gutierrez Crocco and Atzeni, 2021; Webster and Masikane, 2021; Webster et al., 2021). This work, too, has begun with platform work and focuses on the effects of algorithmic management, low income and precarious conditions and imaginative forms of organising, often outside of traditional trade union structures, such as mutual aid based organising among Indonesian app-based drivers (Ford and Honan, 2019; Frey, 2020) and WhatsApp virtual networks among Uber, Bolt and UberEats drivers in South Africa (Chinguno, 2019; Webster and Masikane, 2021). But, as Webster et. al. (2021) and Webster and Masikane (2021) found through their comparative research on these sectors across different countries, organisational forms vary, sometimes building on trade unions and sometimes not, depending on conditions, across what they ultimately call "hybrid" organisations. The Southern Centre for Inequality Studies has generated important new research on digitalisation and changes to work in the global South, focusing particularly on such examples of platform work. An important finding across these studies suggests that, in southern contexts, platform work reproduces patterns of informal work in the specific labour market (Castel-Branco and Mapukata, 2021) and workers' organising adapts in ways that take advantage of existing or potential bargaining power (Webster and Masikane, 2021). Thus southern studies emphasise the embeddedness of these forms of work within local labour markets, the economy and complex worker organisational histories as key to explaining the dynamics. We take these insights forward in this report to scrutinse the less-examined terrain of e-commerce and warehouse workers in the global South.

Due to the increase in the use of these services during the pandemic and the visibility of the "essential" workers employed in the sector, research on the labour process, working conditions and workers' organisation in intermediary e-commerce platforms such as Mercado Libre and other firms in the global South is more pressing

than ever, but still virtually non-existent. Digital markets and intermediary e-commerce platforms like these firms are increasingly morphing – thanks to the control of the platform algorithm – into full-scale financial, logistics and retail conglomerate companies monopolising consumer markets across the world. This has huge consequences for all the workers involved in warehouses and in the logistics and distribution chain, especially for the role played by algorithmic management in shaping the labour process across the chain. The full integration of warehouse and logistics operations through the platform allows companies to have efficient, timely and cheap delivery and to set the conditions for labour recruitment and payments.

Research on the labour process in logistics warehouses in the North of Europe (Dörflinger et al., 2021), on Amazon fulfilment centres in France and Italy (Delfanti, 2021; Massimo, 2021) and on a range of algorithmically controlled manual labour in Germany (Schaupp, 2021) has helped to explain the mechanisms through which flexibility and consent are extracted from workers in different ways according to the existence of different production regimes and institutional settings across countries and locations.

Dörflinger et al. (2021), in their study of third-party logistics in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, argue that the lack of mobilisation of these workers who, from a structural power point of view, occupy a strategic role, is fundamentally due to differences in the institutional regulatory frameworks in the countries analysed. The stronger and more protective is the regulatory system, and the more the power of trade unions as part of that regulatory system, the better it will be for workers to negotiate labour conditions in their favour. Thus, for these authors, in contexts of high regulation such as in Belgium, production regimes are shaped in the form of an "institutional mutuality" that gives power to workers and forces management to compromise; in contexts of less powerful regulation, a regime of "hegemonic flexibility" seems to dominate, forcing management to negotiate consent; finally in contexts of poor regulation, "coercive flexibility" forces workers to accept management decisions.

Adopting a more radical approach, Schaupp (2021) argues that processes of digitalisation are producing what he calls "cybernetic proletarianisation". He thus stresses not only that workers' labour process has become increasingly controlled and algorithmically determined, but also that the same mechanism produces cycles of expulsion of workers and thus creates an increasingly deskilled, proletarianised mass of workers. However, his cases demonstrate that, despite the penetrating changes produced by digitalisation in the configuration of work, workers are able to organise resistance in individual or collective terms, producing new "techno politics of resistance". Contrary to Dörflinger et al.'s (2021) institution-driven model, Schaupp's cases seem to demonstrate that "the digital

economy does not seem to be very fond of the institutions of social partnership … instead a more antagonistic mode of negotiation seems to arise" (Schaupp, 2021: 14).

These contrasting findings from northern European countries open further questions when processes of digitalisation of manual labour and its potential regulation are considered in the contexts of the global South. As the case of a Mercado Libre warehouse in Argentina demonstrates, the existence of a strong industrial relations framework defending workers' rights at the national level and formal trade union representation at the workplace level have not been sufficient to develop forms of "institutional mutuality" as argued by Dörflinger et al. (2021) in relation to highly regulated contexts. Indeed, regulation has been used by the company to hide the massive use of labour broking and high levels of turnover in a clear anti-collectivisation strategy. Thus it is not regulation as such that is the key to better working conditions in the digitalised labour process but rather how that regulatory framework is effectively used and contested by trade unions on the ground to get concessions for the workers they represent. This opens broader questions about workers' interests and collectivisation in the digital economy from the perspective of a sector that holds potential for engaged unionism, unlike the more individualised work of ride-share and delivery drivers examined more commonly in the global South. We turn next to examining the labour process in the warehouse in Argentina, and then we will consider what lessons these experiences raise for South Africa, where e-commerce has both similarities to and differences from e-commerce in Argentina. In the conclusion, we consider the wider implications for studies of digital work in the global South and, in particular, for questions of inequality.

Mercado Libre, a Latin American Amazon?

For many Latin Americans, Mercado Libre represents, in their everyday life of online market transaction, what is Amazon for much of the rest of the world, the by-default platform on which to buy and sell virtually anything. From the point of view of a business model, Amazon was copied by Mercado Libre in many respects, and Amazon Web Services are used by the same Mercado Libre to run its operations (Rikap, 2020).

Mercado Libre's business model is built around three main interconnected activities: the selling and the delivery of products and the provision of payment and financial services to sellers and buyers. These activities are integrated and interconnected through the online platform and the software developed for the associated apps (Mercado Libre, Mercado Pago and Mercado Envio). Other services (Mercado Shops online shops and Mercado ads, which allow sellers to appear more quickly on the platform) complement the main activities. The company

defines this integrated system as an 'eco-system',[1] implying that its system mirrors the perfect integration and harmony usually provided by the natural environment.

The company started in Buenos Aires as a 'garage' dot-com company at the end of the 1990s, specialising in bids and reselling and imitating Ebay (which would later support Mercado Libre financially), and went on to become the most important Latin American company in the online marketplace and e-commerce sector (reaching a Wall Street market value of $10 billion in January 2021), a unicorn in digital business environment slang. (More on Mercado Libre's history and origins is available in Filippetto and Pontoni 2020). In recent years, and particularly coinciding with the growth of the sector due to the pandemic, the company has expanded strongly in the logistics sector, opening newly built warehouses and fulfilment centres in many countries of the region and building its own fleet of planes and vehicles for logistics operations and last mile delivery[2]. Thus we can say that, by now, their activities as a whole have been vertically integrated. Similarly to what occurred in the processes of vertical integration of 20th century industries such as the automotive sector, this integration and the digitalisation and algorithmic management of the whole production flow allows the company to operate tight time and quality control of all stages of the sale and delivery, and to offer high performance service in an economy-of-scale context serving millions of customers. At the same time, this vertical integration has enabled the establishment of direct links between the volume of sales registered on the platform at a certain time and the volume of products that need to be processed in the fulfilment centre. This aspect is central to the way in which the labour process is organised in the fulfilment centre, as we will see later.

The company presents itself as an innovator that has democratised and reduced inequality in access to the market by allowing sellers to reach a market of millions, that has created direct employment and that has generated economic growth through credit to small and medium enterprises[3]. It also claimed this innovator role at organisational level, particularly by describing the company as an organisation based on meritocracy, where talents are valued, where people are paid well and treated fairly and where work-life balance is respected[4]. This company's

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[1] 'Ecosistema Mercado Libre: soluciones para tu negocio'. *Mercaolibre.com.mx,* https://vendedores.mercadolibre.com.mx/nota/ecosistema-mercado-libre-soluciones-para-tu-negocio (Accessed 11 March 2022).

[2] Rikap C., Graña J.M. and Fernández Franco S. 2020. 'Copy&Paste: de cómo Mercado Libre llegó a ser la empresa más importante de América Latina', *Ambito*, 10 August 2020, https://www.ambito.com/opiniones/amazon/copypaste-como-mercado-libre-llego-ser-la-empresa-mas-importante-america-latina-n5123959 (Accessed 11 March 2022).

[3] *El Cronista*. 2017. 'Galperin: "Con Mercado Libre hemos democratizado el comercio, ahora queremos democratizar el dinero"', https://www.cronista.com/financial-times/Galperin-Con-Mercado-Libre-hemos-democratizado-el-comercio-ahora-queremos-democratizar-el-dinero-20171128-0007.html (Accessed 11 March 2022).

[4] 'Historia de Mercado Libre: nuestros primeros pasos, nuestro recorrido', *Mercadolibre.com.ar,* https://www.mercadolibre.com.ar/institucional/somos/historia-de-mercado-libre (Accessed 11 March 2022).

characteristics, together with the 'garage' history and spirit, constitute the company's own 'DNA' – an identity with the company's values that all employees should have. In the discourse of the company and in the everyday chat of warehouse workers, reference to the DNA is a constant and the lack of this DNA is the most common, default justification used by company representatives for making people redundant. While the image of a meritocratic company tends to shape and permeate employees' identity for quality high skills jobs at the central administration level (Palermo and Ventrici 2020), for the manual low skill workers that constitute the big majority in the warehouse we are studying, there seems to be a distance between the rhetoric and the reality.

Mercado Libre in Argentina

For Mercado Libre, Argentina represents the third most important Latin American market after Brazil and Mexico, and its arrival in the country as a logistics services provider is relatively recent compared to these countries. At the moment, the company owns only one fulfilment centre in the greater Buenos Aires area, although others are planned to serve the major urban areas Cordoba and Rosario. The fulfilment centre, which opened at the end of 2019, is a massive 65 000m^2 building, divided into 64 by 62 shelf lines on four floors. Production is organised around three shifts of eight hours, six days a week: morning (6am to 2pm); afternoon (2pm to 10 pm); night (10pm to 6am). Shifts include a 30 minute break and 45 minute meal break. Given Mercado Libre's commitment to dispatch items stored in the warehouse within 24 hours from the time the order is placed on the platform, shifts are normally characterised by fluctuations in demand, with the late afternoons and early nights showing a daily peak in demand. Because of this and the characteristics of certain operations (for instance, the receiving and dispatching areas do not normally operate at night because trucks of sellers and third party logistics companies do not come in), the company normally reassigns workers to departments in need of more personnel or gives a free day or half day to workers who are surplus to requirements in order to compensate for extra hours performed on other days – a time bank system is used. About 3000 workers are currently employed in the fulfilment centre, though this is an estimate by the workers interviewed, given that the vast majority of workers are employed on a temporary basis with high turnover levels. Permanent and temporary workers are equally represented in terms of gender balance, and are mostly students and all young (18 to 25 years old, with the latter age apparently used as a sort of termination date for those on temporary contracts regardless of their previous performance). They wear uniforms of different colours but basically do the same job and are paid roughly the same salary (though in the case of permanent workers, certain benefits apply, such as holidays and social security). The majority of workers live within a 30km radius of the plant

in a densely populated urban area of 13 million people. The company provides shuttle buses from and to the main train stations and public squares of the area.

Work organisation[5]

Work is organised around four main operations: check in, put away, picking and packing. During the check in, products are downloaded from trucks and lorries, checked for quantity and quality, assembled into pallets and then moved to the next operation, put away. During put away, products are distributed to shelves following a random chaotic pattern. A warehouse management system (WMS) registers the exact location of any single product in the plant using the information input into the system by workers scanning each product and the shelf in which it is stored with a handheld device. This has the advantage of providing a more efficient allocation of products on the shelves, and of scattering products which are normally in high demand across different parts of the plant, making the following picking operation more efficient. However, there are rules that apply to the random distribution pattern that workers need to follow: not more than five different products should go onto the same shelf; the whole volume of the shelf must be filled; and similar products or products with a similar packaging must not be put together. During picking, products are picked up from the shelves in an order algorithmically determined by the WMS on the basis of the information recorded in the system. Workers get orders from the handheld device in the form of a picking-up route they have to follow, and indicating each single product they have to pick. The final operation consists of the preparation of boxes and packaging of items according to the nature of the product to be delivered and of assembling products on the basis of the postal or logistics provider taking charge of the delivery. In Argentina, by contrast with what happens in other countries of the region, the last-mile delivery is done by external companies. This appears to be linked to the presence in last-mile logistics of Camioneros, the truckers union, known for its militant approach, as we will see later.

No specific work experience is required to work in Mercado Libre; all operations are characterised by a great amount of manual, low-skill physical work that can be learned in less than a day. There is no formal training. Workers learn their job by doing it or, where possible, by shadowing and following people with more experience. Though a training role is assigned specifically to some workers (these are normally permanent and are called

[5] The following sections analysing the labour process in the Mercado Libre warehouse are based on twelve in-depth interviews with former and actual workers from the warehouse, who were contacted through the website LinkedIn. All names in the report have been changed for anonymity reasons. The company initially supported the research and promised to give us access to the facility but, unfortunately, we were ultimately not given permission to visit the warehouse. Journalistic accounts and the company's own institutional video materials have been used to add details to the reconstruction of the labour process presented by workers.

"multiplicators") in each team or section of the plant, training is usually provided informally, often by workers on a temporary contract with just a few months of experience. Robots are non-existent and there are very few processes of automation in the plant. Products are moved manually one by one or by trailers when moving products across large distances, and machines and elevators are used to help lift very heavy stuff. The fact that production appears almost entirely reliant on manual work is in contrast with findings from studies reporting the increasing use of robots and automation processes in Amazon fulfilment centres in Europe (see Delfanti 2021; Massimo 2021). This can be linked to the relatively cheaper cost of labour in Argentina, which would make robotisation an expensive option, and to the still relatively low volume of items processed compared to Amazon, though this is changing very fast following the Covid-generated expansion of e-commerce.

Workers are normally assigned to a particular operation and, within that, to a particular section (they are assigned to a "mother process" as it is called). Despite this, job rotation is quite frequent, either for reasons associated with production volumes or to workers being reassigned by managerial decisions. Picking, for instance, is a department in which demand for personnel is normally high. It's a very monotonous, repetitive and stressful job in which people are constantly under surveillance, with pre-assigned productivity targets. Nobody wants to work in it and none of the permanent workers do. Workers reported that assigning people who have inadvertently criticised management to this department is used as a punishment. (People are invited at the beginning of the shift to make comments, raise concerns and propose improvements to the production process).

Each section is organised as a working team coordinated by a team leader, who has the function of being both a personnel manager (taking decisions regarding lay-offs of temporary workers, holidays, licences, problems on the job and reporting on performance) and a production manager. They can also assist in case of high volumes, and they work directly on the production line. At the beginning of the shift, team leaders are told the volume expected to be processed and variations occurring in this volume during the day, and distribute the workforce to cover the work positions within the section accordingly. The volume and the need to process it as quickly as possible is central to any team leader's decision making and is constantly reinforced by the company's customer satisfaction discourse. Also connected with this volume-driven approach is the use team leaders make of performance data and how they communicate this data to their teams. A labour management system (LMS) records the time spent by workers in the rest and recreation rooms, in the toilets or in any other activity outside their assigned work position. This, combined with the data from the WMS, allows management to establish the number of hours effectively worked in productive operations, and thus determine a hierarchy based on merit that gives access to benefits (for

instance, a free day if there's low volume) and to positive feedback for temporary workers' aspirations of getting a permanent position and for permanent workers' aspirations to get promoted. Team leaders also get an extra bonus for the overall productivity of their sector and in certain cases, this, together with the direct control they have over each worker's performance, has created "toxic" situations where team leaders are obsessed with productivity targets. In one of these cases, the team leader exerted peer pressure by making public to the whole team the names of those who were under performing and sending out graphics reporting each individual performance at different moments of the day. In other cases, pressure was applied more discreetly on a one-to-one basis or was created by publicly praising, at the beginning of the shift, those individuals who had out-performed the previous day.

Team leaders are almost the same age as the workers on their team so it is quite normal for all of them to establish relations of friendship and camaraderie that continue outside the plant with many workers who are formally subordinated to them in everyday activity. So a dimension of favouritism tends to dominate the decisions they take. Workers report that people with low productivity or other low performance indicators often get benefits just because they are friends of the team leaders.

Team leaders are helped in their production manager role by so called "problem solvers". These are workers with IT skills who, by accessing the data recorded in the WMS, can detect where a problem in the flow of processing occurred, identify the person who was in charge and adopt or suggest measures to solve the problem. A recurrent problem is the mismatch between what is recorded in the WMS as an item stored in a certain shelf and what is actually stored in the same shelf. Problem solvers are normally workers who used to be involved in manual work who have IT skills or a predisposition to IT and have gained experience in the post by helping other problem solvers and team leaders. The job is entirely non-manual, and it is what the majority aspire to given that it is a step forward in the promotion path and a way out of a physically demanding job.

Other important job positions exist in between each of the main operations. The so-called *arquero* (goal keeper), for instance, is in charge of pallet stretching in the check-in area and of collecting empty boxes left on each floor by put-away workers. Pallet stretching, which is wrapping a pallet in cling wrap for transport, is done manually by a single person to the order of 200 pallets a day, and the task produces back pain due to the repetitive movements involved. Together with the extra task of collecting boxes from the floors, this was remembered by a worker as a hectic everyday routine which literally caused "shaking":

> I was running all day from top to bottom, ending the day, and I'm not lying, shaking. But at that time I was happy, I had an athletic and trained body and it didn't cost me so much[6] (Pablo interview, 2021)

Another important activity is what is called "inventory and stock control", a process between put away and picking which consists of checking whether what has been put away on shelves corresponds in quantity and location to what is in the system as recorded by put away workers. It is a kind of quality control job which needs to be done in a proficient way, avoiding mistakes, given that its scope is to detect other people mistakes, but it is nonetheless subjected to productivity targets (number of items and shelves scanned) as are the majority of jobs in the fulfilment centre.

Specific arrangements exist for receiving and checking heavy items (bicycles, TVs and so on) and supermarket goods that are heavy and also fragile. In these sectors, there are no individual productivity targets. People normally work in small teams to carry heavy and fragile goods with lots of autonomy from management. Their work is always performed within a predefined, limited space in the plant. They do not run from place to place as in picking and put away. Workers from these sectors highlight the existence of comradeship and friendship among them and a relatively relaxed work atmosphere – though always depending on the volume of items to be processed – that may lead some people to hide from work, increasing the workload of those who do actually work.

Productivity, control, cooperation and the company's hiring strategy

Productivity is always controlled on an individual basis. Workers have to process a predetermined number of items for each hour of work. This number constantly changes at management's discretion, following increases in the overall volume processed in the fulfilment centre. The increase in e-commerce demand due to the pandemic and further increases given the Argentinean market (which is nevertheless way below the levels of USA or European demand), has been reflected in a corresponding increase in the rhythms of production. While the number of workers employed in the fulfilment centre has grown steadily since October 2019, this has not been enough to cover for the increase in volume. For instance, during check in of heavy items (check-in RK as it is called), a worker explained that she started with a target of 90 items an hour, which had reach 230 by the time she was dismissed just few months later. While in this section, workers work together to move heavy goods and can thus share the burden of the increases, for people in other sections life is more difficult.

During picking and put away, for instance, there is no possibility of sharing work. Tasks are performed independently on the basis of algorithmic management and productivity is calculated strictly on an individual basis,

[6] "*Asi' corriendo de arriba a abajo todo el dia, yo terminaba el dia, y no te miento, temblando. Pero yo en ese tiempo estaba contento, tenia un cuerpo atlético y entrenado y no me costaba tanto.*" Interview with Pablo, checking and put-away worker (19 September 2021).

on the number of items picked or put away per hour. On top of this, in calculating productivity, the system does not differentiate the size of items picked or put away. This concretely means that those who pick or put away big or medium size items (for instance books, small electrical appliances, big boxes) normally have low productivity compared to those who have many small light items (such as headphones) in their buckets, each counting towards the productivity target. Individuals could thus have a bad unproductive day simply due to bad luck (because a truck carrying books instead of headphones had entered the warehouse process that day). Knowing this can happen, team leaders often do send other people out to help or can ask team leaders of other sections to send more people out to give a hand. However, this is not always possible, as high volume complicates changes, and is a bit cumbersome to implement given that team leaders need to amend the low productivity number scored on the system of both the worker who was putting away or picking heavy or big items and the worker who was helping, who had in turn to suspend their own pre-assigned work. Similar situations of workers penalised by something outside their own direct responsibility occur frequently in the fulfilment centre due to the strict interrelation between different operations which are all part of a single just-in-time production process. Despite this, mistakes committed by workers are counted as their own even if the mistake was a consequence of somebody else's mistake in a previous stage. Team leaders can, discretionally and depending on the relation they have with the workers involved, decide to delete the mistake from the performance report and avoid penalisation of workers. However, as in the previous case, we are seeing here a mismatch between algorithmically predefined assignments, management set performance targets and discretion in human-based management interventions that, most of the time, work against the worker, who pays the final cost. Workers tend to consider team leaders obsessed with productivity to be directly responsible for these situations, blaming some of them for the existence of a toxic environment, as we have seen. While this might be partly true given the productivity incentives team leaders receive, one may wonder if putting the final responsibility for mistakes on the shoulders of workers, even when generated by supposedly wrong or blind algorithmic decisions, is not in reality part of managerial polices built into the nature of all digitalised labour process arrangements. For instance, as recorded in recent research on platform delivery workers during the pandemic (Gutierrez Crocco and Atzeni, 2021), platform management (by humans) has used the digitalised intermediation of work (by machines) to purposefully discharge the risks associated with the pandemic onto workers (such as increased street violence, or customers cheating), thus actually increasing the extraction of value from a group of workers greatly exposed to the virus. A similar logic seems to exist in the digitalised fulfilment centre analysed.

A tightening of control accompanied the increase in productivity that started at Mercado Libre coincident with the market created by the pandemic. This control was exerted particularly through the implementation of the labour management system (LMS) as a criterion to measure overall performance. However, LMS for workers is not just attached to the evaluation of their work but is also physically experienced as an instrument of control any time they use a toilet or go to the rest room. In fact, a system of barriers has been implemented in these facilities that allow access by badge only. By scanning their electronic badge, workers are immediately feeding the control system: "There is a terrible time control, for everything you have to sign in, even to go to the bathroom"[7] (Fausto interview, 2021); "Inside there it seems to be a dictatorship, they constantly watch everything, everything is recorded even if it is a mistake"[8] (Pablo interview, 2021).

Despite increased control, workers have been able to introduce small changes to the labour process in order to make their work more efficient and use low demand moments to create buffers to cope with high demand volumes later, to reduce pressure and avoid mistakes that would penalise them, thus basically creating space for some form of autonomy in their labour process (see Burawoy, 1979). This was, for instance, the case with packing boxes for electronic products, the ones most in demand and making up a high percentage of the whole volume, or with ad hoc techniques to store items faster during put away. In picking, workers can also "cheat" the WSM and the individualisation of their work by exchanging buckets with fellow workers to amend the WMS and management policy of not differentiating between heavy and light items. In one case, this cheating of the system was seen as an explicit act of solidarity: "For me, it was always a matter of comradeship... if I got a bucket of 100 headphones that weigh like the 5 books in another bucket, because 'the weight limit per bucket' is 10 kilos, I put myself in the other person's situation and changed the bucket"[9] (Cecilia interview, 2021).

People frequently establish friendship relations that remain even after the working day finishes. Many share the same apartment, social life, use the same transport or come from the same university. Sorority and comradeship seem to exist but, overall, greater collective interest and cohesion do not seem to emerge. This can be attributed to various factors related to the specific organisation of work in the warehouse: the individualised structure of the

[7] "*Hay un control terrible de los tiempos, para todo tenes que fichar, hasta para ir al baño.*" Interview with Fausto, picking worker, interviewed by *La Izquierda Diario*, available at https://www.laizquierdadiario.com/Sebastian-despedido-de-Mercado-Libre-Le-diria-a-Marcos-Galperin-que-no-abuse-de-sus-empleados

[8] "*Allí adentro parece ser una dictadura te vigilan constantemente todo, todo queda registrado por mas que sea una equivocacion.*" Interview with Pablo, checking and put-away worker (19 September 2021).

[9] "*Desde mi parte siempre fue un tema de compañerismo.. si a mi me tocaba una cubeta de 100 auriculares que pesan como los 5 libros de otra cubeta, porque' el limite de peso por cubeta es de 10 kilos, yo me ponía en la situación de la otra persona y le cambiaba la cubeta.*" Interview with Cecilia, put-away worker (25 September 2021).

labour process, the highly competitive working environment that generates peer pressure, and the tight control which makes cooperation difficult and does not create opportunities for sharing.

These factors, however, are facilitated by the company's strategy of massively recruiting workers on temporary contracts: "They hire temporary workers in an abysmal way"[10], said Cecilia (interview, 2021). "They kick you out and you go to the mass grave"[11], said Clara (interview,2021), to indicate the high number of workers who are regularly dismissed. About 70% of the workforce is made of people recruited on temporary contracts and discharged within few months, often independently of their performance on the job. Obscuring the criteria for selection for permanent posts is arguably another company strategy to keep pressure on the workforce, who are driven to outperform by the carrot of stable employment: "In the plant the company has a continuous improvement program in place. I have presented two improvements which were approved. But this wasn't enough to get a permanent job"[12] (Clara interview, 2022).

The ratio between fixed and contracted workers has changed with the start of the pandemic, with more and more workers recruited on a temporary basis. However, while the company recurrently presents itself as a "serial" recruiter by offering job opportunities by the thousands in the middle of the pandemic (and advertising partnership with food chains such as Burger King and Starbucks to absorb workers made redundant in the food sector due to the pandemic (Hatum, 2020)), high turnover rates remain hidden from view. On the one hand, Mercado Libre has formally contracted out the whole system of recruitment of this important part of the workforce to the international recruiting agency Randstad, which has its own offices in the plant. On the other hand, the strategy used by the recruiting agency when formally discharging people is to ask them to sign a voluntary resignation letter, arguing that this would facilitate a new job offer in the future. In this way the high number of layoffs of contracted workers appears to be based simply on individuals' decisions rather than on an explicit company strategy which remains hidden from view.

This reality is in contrast with the image of Mercado Libre as "best employer" as supported by practices of inclusive and respectful management of people, for instance in cases of mothers returning to work (soft landing) and the provision of company kindergartens. This image of "best employer", of a meritocratic company in which career development is not just possible but at the core of the company DNA, is constantly echoed by the company media channels and by management discourse but remains far from the reality of warehouse workers.

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[10] "*Contratan eventuales de manera abysmal.*" Interview with Cecilia, put-away worker (25 September 2021).
[11] "*Te echan y vas a la fosa comun.*" Interview with Clara, check-in heavy item worker(25 September 2021).
[12] "*Hay un programa en la planta de 'mejoras continuas'. Yo presente' dos me las aporbaron pero ni asi' quede.*" Interview with Camila, check-in heavy item worker (25 September 2021).

An impending issue that potentially aggravates the conditions of work in the warehouse is the emergence of health related problems, especially for permanent workers. The accumulation of physically demanding work days characterised by repetitive movements, lifting heavy items and uncomfortable postures for long periods very often produce tendinitis, back pain and other postural problems that can turn into chronic and permanent health issues such as herniated discs. Both temporary and permanent workers have mentioned these health issues as a major problem:

> It's a job in which you end up physically broken.[13] (Fausto interview, 2021)

> My first experience in Meli [Mercado Libre] was wonderful, I was delighted. Later, the second time I worked, I realised that it wasn't like that and I understood why … there was an enormous physical exhaustion, after a month I had back pain that there's no words to explain … I couldn't walk.[14] (Julia interview, 2021)

> Mentally I was super stressed and bitter, physically very hurt and working with pain in a place that you no longer like but that you have no other alternative is a horrible feeling of impotence.[15] (Pablo interview, 2021)

However, while duties provoke discomfort and overall fatigue for the first group but are basically gone with the end of their generally short employment experience with Meli, the longer exposure to these working conditions builds up much more serious consequences for the permanent group. This is partly due to workers' own decisions to postpone taking sick leave to avoid the consequent salary reduction – there is a 10% bonus for job attendance – and partly due to the personnel office's strategy of discouraging workers from going for first aid assistance in hospitals, where they could get a diagnosis, a cure and a sick leave certificate on the same day, and to rather get an appointment with a specialist, which can take up to a month to get. This strategy, which in the discourse is aiming to take good care of workers' health, is in reality used to avoid sudden disruptions, postpone the problem and keep workers on the job despite health issues, which actually get worse with the passing of time.

As with the high turnover levels, concerns related to workers' health conditions and the consequences in terms of production days lost due to absences remain obscured and do not affect production because of the continuous flow of contracted workers. This has been clearly the most successful hidden company strategy to keep potentially conflicting issues at bay. This strategy, however, has been implemented together with a policy of high salaries. Compared to other workers in the logistics sector and beyond, salaries at Meli are quite generous, reaching a value approximately twice the minimum wage (around $700 a month). For permanent workers, the collective

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[13] "*Es un trabajo que terminas roto físicamente.*" Interview with Fausto, picking worker (20 September 2022).
[14] "*Mi primera experiencia en Meli fue maravillosa, yo estaba encantada. Despues en la segunda vuelta me di cuenta que no era tan asi'…y entendi' porque' …..había un enorme desgaste físico. Yo al mes tenia un dolor de espalda que no te puedo explicar, no podía caminar.*" Interview with Julia, put-away worker (27 September 2021).
[15] "*Mentalmente me tenia super estresado y amargado, físicamente muy lastimado y trabajar con dolor en un lugar que ya no te gusta pero que no te queda otra alternativa es una sensación de impotencia horrible.*" Interview with Pablo, checking and put-away worker (19 September 2021).

contract that regulates their work, signed by Meli and a small trade union (explained further in the next section), provides benefits traditionally associated with formal work such as holidays, social security contributions, regular increases to keep salaries at the level of inflation and so on. On top of this, the company often adds special compensation for high productivity associated with special periods (in 2020 bonus of $500 was paid to award workers for their effort during the pandemic) or days (Black Friday, for instance). For young people, mostly students with no previous job experience, these levels of earning represent a lot of money and a powerful incentive to work hard, up to the point of putting their health at risk by accepting a work process that is physically hard, in exchange for money. On top of this, the image of Meli as a cool, successful, modern, meritocratic company that values individuals has conquered the hearts and minds of many young workers who identified with Meli's DNA and wanted to "vibrate" (another word loved by Meli) with the company, only to later touch with their hands a different reality. Pablo, a permanent worker, said:

> The company sweetens your ears when you enter, you believe the whole story … I worked hard to remain as permanent worker, and this was recognised by colleagues and superiors. I was happy because I was going to have a formal job, I was already saved ... But I didn't know what I was getting into, when I went to work I went with my head held high, super proud.. When I realised what it really was I didn't want to work anymore, I wanted to go home, I was leaving the plant in tears.[16] (Pablo interview, 2021)

Workers representation and inter-union conflicts

Compared to other countries in the region, and against the tendency in the rest of the world, trade unions in Argentina remain politically and economically strong and continue to play an important part in the defence of workers' rights and representation. A well-established system of industrial relations gives one trade union in each economic sector the power to negotiate and represent workers in that sector, particularly by means of collective bargaining. Within this, given Argentina's high inflation (about 50% a year), negotiating wages at or above the inflation rate is the main activity of trade unions. Workers' representation is further strengthened at workplace level by elected shop-floor commissions (*comisiones internas*) and by the trade union role as a health-service provider. The system of representation creates monopoly power and a tendency to bureaucratisation and top-down organising. However, a counter tendency has also historically appeared with more militant bottom-up forms of organisation that have challenged existing trade union leaderships, often using the existing *comisiones internas*,. These tendencies and counter tendencies and inter-union disputes over the representation of workers in new emerging sectors have

[16] "*Laempresa te endulza las orejas al entrar, te crees todo el cuento. Hice un arduo trabajo para quedar efectivo, reconocido por compañeros y superiores. Yo estaba contento porque iba a tener un trabajo en blanco, ya estaba salvado, pero no sabia en donde me estaba metiendo. Yo cuando entre' a trabajar iba con la frente alta, super orgulloso pero a medida de que me di cuenta de lo que era ya no quería trabajar mas, me quería ir a mi casa, me iba llorando de la empresa"*. Interview with Pablo, checking and put-away worker (19 September 2021).

always contributed to a conflictual dynamic in workers' representation in Argentina, which we can find also in the case of Mercado Libre.

The logistics sector in which Mercado Libre operates is a contested sector that involves not only last-mile transport and distribution but also the warehouses in which products are stored and processed, which in their turn serve broader e-commerce platforms such as Mercado Libre. At the same time it is a sector that is expanding fast and creating new groups of workers in need of representation. In Argentina, the truckers union (Camioneros) has gradually extended its sphere of representation since the 1990s to virtually anything that moves or is connected with movement, representing workers employed by various logistics companies, many of which operate as Mercado Libre subcontractors in last-mile delivery, as well as workers employed by companies such as Coca Cola to distribute beverages. Camioneros is a well-known union in Argentina with a high level of mobilisation capacity and a loyal membership who occupy a strategic structural position that gives them power in the marketplace and the economy as a whole. All this makes Camioneros a highly powerful political player, with leverage over governments of any colour and feared by employers at workplace level.

Knowing this background, before opening its fulfilment centre at the end of 2019, Mercado Libre had already guaranteed the formal recognition of its workforce and signed a highly flexible collective contract with the Union de Carga y Descarga, a small union formally representing low-skilled manual workers in central fruit and vegetable markets in the greater Buenos Aires. This move was strategically planned to avoid the presence of Camioneros in the plant, but has not gone unopposed. In July 2020, less than a year after the beginning of Mercado Libre operations in Argentina and in the middle of Covid lockdown measures, Camioneros organised a blockade of Mercado Libre subcontracting operators' warehouses that nearly stopped the activity of the ML fulfilment centre, in protest against the precarisation of truck drivers working for these companies and directly blaming Mercado Libre for this (Filippetto and Pontoni, 2020). The conflict easily became the object of media and political attention, and the situation called for high level government intervention to de-escalate the conflict[17]. Camioneros suspended the blockade but continued to make claims in courts and at ministerial level for representation of Mercado Libre workers. These legal attempts have not been successful so far. Carga y Descarga has been recognised as the organisation legally in charge of representing workers at Mercado Libre.[18] However, the strategic position occupied

[17] Lafuente, E. 20202. 'Mercado Libre. Los motivos del conflict sindical con Camioneros y los Moyano', *La Nacion,* 17 July 2020, https://www.lanacion.com.ar/economia/mercado-libre-los-motivos-del-conflicto-sindical-nid2399112 (Accessed 11 March 2022).

[18] Infogremiales. 2021. 'La Justicia dio lugar a la cautelar que interpuso Carga y Descarga y dejó a Camioneros fuera de subsidiarias de Mercado Libre', 1 June 2021, https://www.infogremiales.com.ar/la-justicia-dio-lugar-a-la-cautelar-que-interpuso-carga-y-descarga-y-dejo-a-camioneros-fuera-de-las-subsidiarias-de-mercado-libre/ (Accessed 11 March 2022).

by Camioneros, representing workers in Mercado Libre subcontractors, or changes in the socio-political context, such as a future government coming to power which is more hostile to trade unions, are important factors that could change the current status quo.

Beyond this inter-union dynamic, we have seen how workplace issues are starting to emerge, with tensions generated by the mismatch between algorithmic and human-based management, long term health consequences postponed and hidden from view, and the distance between company rhetoric and the reality of a value-driven labour process. So far, the company strategy to keep one leg in the framework of industrial relations, by accepting a formal union presence and by signing a contract and negotiating high wages with this union, and another outside, by massively hiring temporary workers, has been successful. For all the workers interviewed, the union and its elected shop-floor delegates were considered distant entities and remembered more for being the organisers of excellent Christmas parties than for defending workers. Clearly, the massive use of temporary workers plays against the possibility of future collective responses either within or outside the existing union framework. However, one may expect that, the more the company grows, the greater will be the number of those on a permanent contract in a position to make demands within the available legal framework.

Based on our research with warehouse workers in Argentina, we explore some possible lessons for South Africa (and other Southern contexts) before we conclude with some directions for future research.

Lessons for South Africa

As in Argentina, South Africa's e-commerce sector is growing. In particular, Covid-19 extended attention on and use of e-commerce channels. Before the pandemic, retailers acknowledged the arena as a global trend, but most analysts felts that it would be limited. Since then, many bricks and mortar retailers have extended their online platforms, and e-commerce platforms have grown exponentially (see also Guga and Spatari, 2021; Spatari, 2020). In Argentina, internet access is higher than in South Africa but in South Africa it is growing. Thus in Argentina, in the fourth quarter of 2021, 64.2% of urban households were reported to have access to a computer and 90.4% to the internet. In addition, data shows that 88 out of every 100 people in Argentina use a mobile phone and 87 out of every 100 use the internet.[19] By comparison, while internet access in South Africa remains below 65%, explained by deep inequalities in access linked to spatial coverage and particularly high data costs (Buthelezi and Hodge 2019:

[19] Tecnología. *Indec* (website). https://www.indec.gob.ar/indec/web/Nivel3-Tema-4-26 (Accessed 6 June 2022).

205),[20] it is expanding, with a growth in internet access of 3.1% a year and a growth in social media use of 19% a year (up to 2019) (Competition Commission, 2020: 5). Like Argentina, internet connections are often made via mobile phones, such that South Africa's population of 58.9 million people have 103.5 million mobile phone connections (Competition Commission, 2020: 5).

The e-commerce sector itself in South Africa appears to be less monopolised than in Argentina, with a range of actors, including major local e-commerce platforms such as Takealot and Loot. In South Africa, the largest global e-commerce players such as Amazon do not operate their e-commerce businesses from within South Africa, although Amazon is present in South Africa with its cloud computing business and has opened a call centre employing 7000 people. Furthermore, it intends to open its first warehouse in South Africa, but has experienced legal challenges.[21] This means that, in South Africa, the terrain has grown as in Argentina, through domestic operations, in some cases with start-up foreign investment.[22] Furthermore, for South Africa, e-commerce expansion suggests that there will be an expansion of the numbers and sizes of warehouses attached to these firms, with implications for employment and labour conditions in warehouses (see Teuteberg, 2020).[23]

While there is scarce research on warehouse labour processes in South Africa, there are some indications that the conditions in Takealot warehouses are similar to those in Argentina.[24] A brief survey of some of the entries from the website Indeed.com gives a view into the relatively obscured space of work, and offers useful hints for future research. Workers reported there was "unplanned overtime and long hours". A former packing/picking supervisor in Johannesburg wrote, "I worked as outbound packing champ [supervisor] & the company does not care about the staff at all they also use employment agencies & staff come & go on a daily basis". An administrator who worked at the time for Takealot in Cape Town said, "The environment is not a nice one to work for especially at the DCs [distribution centres]. The only thing that matters is to meet SLA [service level agreements], people

[20] And see Competition Commission of South Africa. Data Services Market Inquiry: Final Report. Pretoria: Competition Commission SA. 2 December. https://www.compcom.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/DSMI-Non-Confidential-Report-002.pdf (Accessed 9 July 2022).

[21] Louise Matsakis and Patrick Egwu. 2021. 'New documents shed light on Amazon's controversial Africa headquarters', Restofworld.org, 21 October 2021, https://restofworld.org/2021/amazon-controversial-africa-headquarters/ (Accessed 21 Feb 2022).

[22] Public hearings of the Competition Commission for the Online Intermediation Platforms Market Inquiry (OIPMI) held from 2 to 19 November [extended to 29 November] 2021, and interview with James Hodge, Competition Commissioner and chair of the Online Intermediation Platforms Market Inquiry (OIPMI) by Bridget Kenny, 22 February 2022, online.

[23] For instance the smaller e-commerce site, OneDayOnly, which "prioritises" local suppliers, found it needed to extend its warehousing to keep up with orders; see Admire Moyo. 2021. OneDayOnly expands warehouses, jobs as e-commerce booms, *IT Web*, 10 February 2021, https://www.itweb.co.za/amp/content/JBwEr7nBngo76Db2 (Accessed 1 Feb 2022).

[24] From Indeed.com, a site where employees or former employees can register their opinions about the employer. There are a number of suggestive entries about Takealot. The entries are quoted verbatim as on the site, with the typos, and so on as in the original (https://za.indeed.com/cmp/Takealot.com/reviews, accessed 1 November 2021 by Claire Ceruti). While we need to use such sources carefully, in the context of difficult research access, online opinion sites have been used to great effect (see for instance, Chan, 2011).

health n safety are put second and the management id [sic] not very accommodating". These employee opinions suggest long hours, poor health and safety conditions, and the use of labour brokers, issues similar to those expressed in detail by Mercado Libre workers. While we cannot confirm these conditions in South Africa, it points to the need for future research within warehouses, particularly those of e-commerce players.

Tangential research into manufacturing firms with logistics facilities in Gauteng province offers another glimpse into labour processes within warehousing, even if not directly in e-commerce. These manufacturing firms have adapted to restructured supply chains by integrating their own warehousing facilities or bringing warehousing and logistics auxiliary services on to site (Interview, 17 February 2022; Dor and Runciman, 2022).[25] Dor understands these moves to be partly about reducing manufacturing core business by outsourcing to "logistics" as much as possible (Dor Interview, 17 February 2022). The research suggests, as well, that the packaging and supplying of a firm's products and getting those correct for the channel has become a key part of adapting as a production firm. The labour process, labour and employment conditions within the warehouses of production firms varied. In some, workers said that robots were used in the distribution centres, particularly robotic pallets, which meant that instead of workers putting the pallets of products together at the end of the line, robotic arms would stack them. But many also reported that their jobs could not simply be mechanised. In one food production firm, self-palleting occurred in one plant, but in the other two, labour-intensive manual labour was used, where workers used a hand-held metal pallet jack. In another firm, remote control cranes operated in a warehouse which was the length of a football field, but workers had to walk behind the cranes to operate the remote. In another distribution centre of a retailer, workers used hand scanners to pack orders for stores but new mechanisation was being introduced in smaller sections of the distribution centre. In this research, the distribution centres were all new, built within the past ten years. Unions were not well organised in these logistics sections (Dor Interview, 17 February 2022)[26]. Indeed, in an overview of technological changes to bricks and mortar retailing in Africa, trade unionists reported uncertainty and anxiety about the introduction of e-commerce (Teuteberg, 2020).

The similarity of the timing of expansion of e-commerce, its use of precarious waged employment, including potentially the use of temporary employment services, and the outlook in both countries to expansion of these channels for distribution, offers lessons from the Argentinian case for South Africa. In addition, South Africa's industrial relations regime, which maintains worker and trade union organisational rights and a history of sectoral

[25] Interview with Lynford Dor, researcher, by Bridget Kenny, 17 February 2022, online.
[26] Interview with Lynford Dor, researcher, by Bridget Kenny, 17 February 2022, online.

organising, suggests that Argentina's experience with trade union organising indicates important cautions. The key lessons that we take from the experience of workers at Mercado Libre revolve around the organisation of the labour process through a combination of algorithmic management and more traditional uses of supervision, where the arbitrary power of hierarchy over, particularly, low waged and low skilled workers may reproduce relations of abjection (and in South Africa's case, racialised despotism). Furthermore, the territorial battles between commercial unions and transport unions over new sectors such as distribution is important for South Africa. If this sector is indeed a growing one in the economy, as in Argentina, then unions will need to work out how best to cover workers and not compete with each other to organise them. Yet the fragmented and precarious nature of the employment contracts of many warehouse workers also suggests to unions in South Africa, which have not organised these segments well, that such challenges will be fundamental to shifts in organising. Finally, the Argentinean example also means that to organise the workforce, their young workers specifically, unions will have to do more than stand as legal representatives. Bringing the experiences of Mercado Libre workers to South Africa emphasises the urgency of changes to the economy and forms of work.

Conclusion

This project examining e-commerce in Argentina highlights that more research on the nature of the sectors and the conditions generated in South Africa and other Southern countries is urgent. New research on the US and Europe, and particularly on Amazon, helps to extend our understanding of labour processes, worker organising and best-practice circumstances. Nevertheless, the studies in this report reveal that the differences in local capital and the complexity of the field, combined with important differences in labour process in the South, such as more labour intensive work organisation and high levels of temporary labour use, as well as differences in unionisation, complicate our understanding of an important growing (and globalised) sector. In Argentina, in particular, the existence of a strong system of industrial relations and union recognition has not been a guarantee for better working conditions in the warehouse. Contrary to the role and importance assigned to institutional regulatory frameworks in North European countries, as emphasised by Dörflinger et al. (2021), Mercado Libre has been able to take advantage of the system of workers' representation legally in place to co-opt the union. This and the possibility of exploiting loopholes in the legal framework has been observed as well in Amazon in Italy and France (Massimo, 2021), systems in which an extended protection of workers' rights is in place, opening a question about the real extent to which traditional forms of protection and regulation can be effective in an increasingly digitalised working context. However, by adopting a labour process perspective, we can show distinctive moments in which labour

conflict can emerge even in contexts of high tech control, giving room to what Schaupp calls "techno politics from below".

The lessons we learn from Argentina further suggest that research into warehouse and logistics operations in South Africa would be a critical site of future labour research, with the tentative indication of similar patterns of long hours, health and safety concerns, and the use of labour brokers. Furthermore, differences with Argentina's context of trade union jurisdiction might give South African unions lessons for cross-sectoral campaigns drawing on commercial unions and transport unions. The limited evidence of union presence within the sector in South Africa also offers an urgent call to draw on workers' experience elsewhere to begin to think strategically about the terrain. While unions are certainly aware of these developments and connected into global focus on the sector (see Teuteberg, 2020; Spatari, 2020), nevertheless, concrete analysis from other global Southern countries offers much to local activists and unionists.

A research focus on e-commerce and warehouse workers, in turn, highlights critical dimensions of inequality and labour markets from the Global South. As Francis and Webster (2019) argue for South Africa, the reproduction of segmented and precarious labour markets in the context of the deep histories of division within post-colonial societies has consequences not only for representation of workers and improvement of conditions of work, but in fact, for deepening inequality, at odds with legislative reform meant to protect workers. In short, e-commerce is a growing field in the global South as elsewhere. This report emphasises the importance of researching these contexts to better understand the conditions here. If we consider how Mercado Libre operates, we can note that the company culture of being a new, hip and socially known firm, its practices of recruiting young workers, and its strategic bargaining with one union to forestall a more militant union's claim to the jurisdiction, tell a story of the specific locatedness of e-commerce within local networks and structured relations. And yet these features also link suggestively to South Africa's experience of aspirational and expanded consumption, convenient service and increasing internet usage. The warning of the combination of exhausted embodied labour with the technicist forms of algorithmic control sound loudly for understandings of how the sector may play out in South Africa's economy. While the market may extend access to new capital, these investments may very well be linked to new and complex forms of precarious labour with implications for the reproduction of inequalities that constitute new horizons of racial capitalism.

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