Foodpanda riders' strike: a look behind the scenes of 2-day action and what it says of Hong Kong's labour movement

- Showdown between online meals delivery platform and couriers ends in 'very good package' accepted by riders, who organised themselves in chat groups
- Union member involved in talks say despite the disbandment of major workers' body in city under political pressure from authorities, labour activism still has much to offer

https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/hong-kong-economy/article/3157373/foodpanda-drivers-strike-look-behind-scenes-2-day?module=perpetual_scroll&pgtype=article&campaign=3157373

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Foodpanda workers hold up protest slogans. Photo: May Tae

A November weekend showdown between delivery giant Foodpanda and a group of its Hong Kong couriers, one that placed the welfare of the city's gig economy workers in an unfamiliar spotlight, was a decidedly grass-roots affair.

Within two days of setting up a group on the Telegram messaging app, a chat that began with just a handful of friends had 1,300 members making their voices heard, according to Waqas Fida, the 27-year-old face of the strike.

On November 13 and 14, 300 food couriers unhappy with their sliding wages would ultimately walk off the job of their own accord. They were, notably, not represented by a union.

“A lot of the riders are ethnic minorities; some of us don’t have higher education degrees; we don’t know much about app development and the technical aspect. What we do know is that the pay per order in 2020 was HK$50 [US$6.40] and now in 2021 it’s HK$40,” Fida told the Post. “That’s what we wanted to fix.”

In the end, while failing to secure a per-delivery guarantee, riders came away from the marathon 14-hour negotiating session satisfied with the company’s pledges to improve pay and deal with frustrating issues around the app that dictates their workday.

While no terms were disclosed, Fida called it “a very good package”.

The two-day work stoppage marked the first major industrial action since the Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU), once the city’s biggest opposition-leaning umbrella group for workers’ rights, folded in September under mounting political pressure.

A fleet members’ representative meets the media amid negotiations. Photo: Felix Wong

A month earlier, the city's largest teachers union had done the same.

But the Foodpanda riders' stand has offered a glimmer of hope to those fearful the imposition of the national security law – leveraged against both of the closed unions – might mark the end of the city's labour movement.

The strike had its beginning in conversations on social media and messaging platforms, where couriers traded concerns about their pay and other issues.

Those conversations led to Fida opening the Telegram group on November 11. Digital and printed posters translated by members of the chat group rapidly followed.

When the strike officially began on November 13, paralysing Foodpanda's on-demand grocery service Pandamart, riders gathered at company branches around the city, including those in Kowloon Bay, Kwun Tong and Quarry Bay, to air their grievances.

A number of riders, both Chinese and those from ethnic minority communities, got in touch with Fida that weekend. Communicating at times with the help of volunteer translators, they were soon meeting to lay the groundwork for negotiations.

"[The negotiating team] didn't know each other at first. We met during the strike, then the more active members became a group and we all worked together," Fida said.

It was at one of the strike gatherings where the riders met Ho Hung-hing, organising secretary of the Catering and Hotel Industries Employees General Union, who volunteered to sit at the negotiating table and help consolidate the fleet's concerns.

"We met a few vocal fleet members during the strike and exchanged contact numbers. One of the riders from Kwun Tong got in touch with Foodpanda directly, and the company set a meeting, so we stepped in to work out their top demands for the company to address," Ho said.

The riders' initial priority was for a minimum fee of HK$50 per delivery and HK$30 for those taken on foot. Issues with the app's navigation system, restaurant delays and cancellation of orders were also raised.

The union Ho leads was once a sub branch of the now-defunct CTU. Now operating independently, he said his union had no political leanings and continued to advocate for the protection of everyday workers.

"In the past, labour unions would demand change from the government to pass laws or establish guidelines to protect workers, but that route often takes too long," he said.

Despite the CTU's disbandment, Ho said the city's labour movement still had much to offer.

"As long as there are businesses that treat workers badly, employees will continue to demand for fairer conditions, and we'll stand by their side,' he said.

In the case of Foodpanda, one of Hong Kong's largest food and grocery delivery platform, Ho said the company was acutely aware of how a long strike might affect both its image and bottom line.

"Foodpanda saw how damaging it was for its reputation and operations if its rider fleet were unhappy on a large scale, so the company had to act quickly," he said.

Dr Jenny Chan Wai-ling, assistant professor of applied social sciences at Polytechnic University, said last weekend's negotiations showed the power of Hong Kong's civil society, particularly given the absence of an established union leading the talks.

"There is no confidence that companies and other platforms like Foodpanda will actually make worker's rights a top priority, that's why we rely on workers and labour unions [to speak up] as well as online concern groups," she said.

Local media and online entities, as well as community organisers such as the Riders' Rights Concern Group and the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee, lent their weight by posting infographics showing how riders' pay had fallen along with anecdotes about work injuries that were shared thousands of times.

"Data compiled by different concern groups and anecdotes from riders became powerful evidence to explain why riders were fed up. These social media posts also explain why the issue spread like fire and support from customers and riders," Chan said.

In Hong Kong, "gig economy" workers are typically hired on short-term contracts or on a freelance basis by food delivery and ride-hailing companies, and have no union working on their behalf.

Their wages are determined by company algorithms that emphasise efficiency and profits, according to Chan.

Matthew Durham, a registered foreign lawyer at Gall Solicitors, said digital platforms used the algorithms because they offered flexibility based on shifting market demand and other business fluctuations.

That flexibility, however, can leave riders with a lower level of security and predictability with regards to their pay.

"The recent strikes in Hong Kong have raised the issue of what would be a fair and reasonable way for companies to remunerate self-employed persons such as couriers, [one that] provides a level of certainty for the individuals while allowing businesses to remain operationally nimble," Durham said.

He added the outcome of last week's lengthy negotiations had been "ultimately productive in recognising the pressures on both sides of the equation", but it was unlikely to be the last time pay in Hong Kong's gig economy would come in for scrutiny.