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To cite this article: Chiara Vitrano & Wojciech Kęblowski (2023): ‘Bouncing between the buses like a kangaroo’: efficient transport, exhausted workers, Mobilities, DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2023.2249623

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2023.2249623
‘Bouncing between the buses like a kangaroo’: efficient transport, exhausted workers

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ABSTRACT
While transport and mobility studies have focused on diverse challenges related to improving the quality of public transport (PT) for its passengers, they have hardly examined the well-being and livelihoods of PT workers. To address this gap, we explore the work spaces and times of bus drivers employed in PT in Gothenburg and Stockholm (Sweden), where PT operations are procured from private companies to ensure service quality and financial efficiency. Drawing upon studies on capitalist temporalities of work, we observe that the bus drivers are obliged to perform fatiguing work tasks under constant time pressure, which generates daily conflicts between bodily, personal, and work rhythms. The drivers’ time wealth is severely constrained, as they have limited capacity to control their own time and experience a near-constant work-life imbalance. Our findings indicate that such hindrances are not simply a product of work rhythms marked by the rigidity of the PT timetable. Rather, they emerge from the operational and financial logic of procurement that contradicts the well-being and livelihoods of PT workers. We conclude with a plea to place workers as essential actors for future reflections on inequalities and injustices related to transport and mobility.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 10 January 2023
Accepted 4 August 2023

KEYWORDS
Transport workers; bus drivers; public transport; time wealth; Sweden

Introduction

For almost 20 years, public transport in Stockholm County has been outsourced to private business through the system of public procurement. […] Consequently, companies that have submitted the lowest bid tend to win the procurement, which in turn has put pressure on working conditions for staff. […] In the autumn of 2017, the trade unions […] invited representatives of the employees and the political parties operating in the region to a general meeting. […] There was a consistent picture of reduced security, a systematic shortage of staff and increased costs that have resulted from poorly executed procurements (Åkersten, Klemetsson, and Södergren Poikulainen 2019)

This is only one of many news reports that have in recent years appeared in Swedish media describing how public procurement of public transport (PT) networks affects the well-being and
livelihood of PT workers. Introduced in Sweden in 1989, the policy of public procurement constituted a significant shift in PT management. It allowed regional PT authorities, responsible for the planning and provision of urban, inter-urban and rural PT, to ‘purchase transport services subject to competition’ (Molander 2018, 1813), thus assigning the operation of PT to private companies via competitive tendering. This mechanism has become common practice across the country, regulating most of the local PT networks. The proponents of public procurement argue that it increases operational and financial efficiency of PT services and ensures continuous improvement of PT quality in terms of coverage, frequency, comfort, safety and integration across transport modes, making PT a viable alternative to automobility. On the other hand, as reported by local and national media, trade unions bemoan a deterioration of working conditions in PT, citing long working days, unpaid breaks (Erlandsson 2020) and inadequate spaces for resting (Gunnarsson 2021), resulting in tiredness and ‘lack of private life’ (Malmberg 2021).

The apparent contradiction between the efficiency of PT services and the exhaustion of its workers leads us to explore working conditions in procured PT systems in Gothenburg and Stockholm (Sweden). Addressing this issue requires facing a double research gap. First, contemporary transport studies provide few tools for understanding the agency and well-being of transport workers in the global North. For instance, research into transport sustainability has explored in depth the challenge of improving service efficiency and quality to reflect diverse needs of passengers and attract them to PT services (Banister 2011; Schwanen, Banister, and Anable 2011). However, it has paid much less attention to the impact these innovations may have on the well-being and agency of workers who operate, maintain and monitor the PT services. The latter are more present in studies emerging from critical approaches to transport and mobility, which have attended to workers in informal settings, especially in the global South and East (Rekhviashvili et al. 2022), exploring their labour conditions, organisation and agency, as well as the role that the sector plays in the dynamics of rural-to-urban migration and urbanisation (e.g. Agbiboa 2018; Doherty 2017; Ference 2016; Sopranzetti 2018; Rizzo and Atzeni 2020). Notably, Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev (2018, 1377–8) observed that ‘transport workers’ livelihoods and working conditions […] are […] shaped by […] power differentials and by diverse ways of governing urban mobility [as […] the constraints on and insecurities of transport workers […] significantly shape mobility practices, such as urban transport’s (lack of) affordability, accessibility, convenience and safety (1377–1378)’. Exploring the links between transport labour, capitalist exploitation and intersectional inequalities in the global North has long been a central focus of transport geographers (Attoh 2019; Henderson 2013), sociologists (Davis 2016) and historians (Freeman 1989; Wolﬁnger 2016). However, attending to these questions outside the global South is much less common among mobilities scholars (but see e.g. Kęblowski and Rekhviashvili 2022), as if the supposed formality of transport systems in the global North meant that well-being of workers could be taken for granted. Similar absence can be observed in debates inspired by the notions of transport equity (Litman 2002), transport justice (Martens 2017), and mobility justice (Cook & Butz 2016; Sheller 2018), which attends to inequalities (re)produced by transport policy and infrastructure but, to our knowledge, do not specifically address transport workers’ livelihoods and working conditions. This absence is strongly reflected in the Mobilities journal, where only three papers seem to have addressed head-on the question of transport labour, engaging with female seafarers (Stanley 2008), motorbike-taxi drivers in informal transport (Peters 2022), and cycle workers (Murthy and Sur 2022).

Second, while transport workers have been the focus of work emerging from occupational health and safety studies, this literature is yet to engage with the structural causes that frame the labour and livelihood conditions of transport workers. Occupational scholars have explored health risks, sleepiness and fatigue, stress, well-being and job satisfaction of bus drivers (e.g. Maynard et al. 2021; Kwon, Byun, and Park 2019; Tse, Flin, and Mearns 2006), and have identified work-overload and work-life conﬂicts as sources of emotional exhaustion among bus drivers (Chen and Hsu 2020). Notwithstanding its valuable contribution, this literature seldom addresses
the link between the risk for physical and mental health, well-being, and job satisfaction for bus drivers on the one hand, and broader socio-economic and policy processes affecting contemporary transport and mobility systems on the other. The relation between working conditions and policy agendas behind PT provision seems largely absent in most studies focused on PT workers. Notable exceptions to this rule exist, including McIntyre’s (2005) use of Labour Process Theory that investigates occupational illness as a result of unequal relations of production in the capitalist labour process, as well as studies on threats and violence towards PT workers related to market- and customer-orientation of PT (Salomonson and Fellesson 2014; Scholten et al. 2017).

To address this gap, we propose to explore the power dynamics affecting PT workers’ livelihoods and working conditions in Gothenburg and Stockholm, where PT is procured to private companies. Learning from studies on the temporarities of work and time-related inequalities in contemporary accelerated societies (Wajcman and Dodd 2016; Adam 2003), we explore the power dynamics affecting PT workers by analysing the spaces and times of their work. Accordingly, we provide a novel lens on working conditions focusing on different dimensions of their time wealth (Reisch 2001; Rinderspacher 2012, 1988), defined as a multidimensional construct that includes the availability of sufficient time to conduct the required and desired activities, compatibility between work-rhythms and personal and social rhythms, work-life balance, and control on one’s own time. We centre upon temporality and time wealth as a crucial yet under-researched dimension of workers’ well-being that intertwines with other facets of workers’ livelihoods such as salaries, benefits, employment contracts, physical and social work environment, health, safety, control and participation. Nonetheless, these factors remain beyond the scope of this paper.

The temporalities of work in procured public transport

The temporality of work in capitalist societies

The temporalities of industrial and post-industrial capitalist societies have been the object of numerous reflections in sociology (among others, Giddens 1995; Adam 1990) and geography (among others, May and Thrift 2003; Harvey 1990). Dominant temporal logics, defined as ‘the socially legitimated, shared assumptions about time that are embedded in institutional and societal norms, discourses, material and technological processes, and shared ideologies’ (Erickson and Mazmanian 2016, 153–4), result from often taken-for-granted socio-temporal processes and reproduce inequalities in the form of temporal privileges and disadvantages.

Adam (2003) offers a thorough account of such processes. A crucial one is the commodification of time (Giddens 1995). In industrial societies, time joins money as a supposedly objective, decontextualised and quantifiable unit of measure. The commodification of time imposes a ‘purely quantitative approach to time’ (Adam 2003, 101), where allocation of time geared towards efficiency and profit does not consider other aspects of time use, beyond its exchange value as a commodity. As a result, time is reduced to clock-time, ‘a crucial technology for coordination and control’ (Blyton et al. 2017, 2). Equated with money, commodified time is perceived as a scarce resource, bringing about the focus on speed as necessary condition for efficiency, competitiveness and profit. This view legitimises the intensification and time compression of work activities. Relatedly, ‘times when nothing happens, breaks and pauses, waiting and rest, are considered unproductive, wasteful, lost opportunities’ (Adam 2003, 96). Within work relations, the commodification of time encourages employers to adopt strategies of ‘time editing’ (O’Malley 1990 in Adam 2003). Since the conception of Taylorism, work processes are fragmented into smaller tasks, allocated standard durations and re-assembled to eliminate any idle time in production processes. As a result, instead of being ‘organized and measured according to events and the activities that constitute them’, time at work is ‘subjected to the impersonal schedule and monitored by reference to the implacable clock’ (Blyton et al. 2017, 3). The crisis of Fordism
has exacerbated such processes and the need for optimizing efficiency of working time has led to workforce flexibilization and just-in-time production.

The neoliberal turn has further redefined ‘the temporal frames of production, distribution and consumption’ (Mallet 2014, 3), as work times became less and less standardized, both in terms of duration and of temporal location within the 24 hours. In this context, time that is not spent for production or consumption aims is seen as an ‘obstacle to the good economic functioning of society’ and as ‘a time reserve that can become profitable’ (Mallet 2014, 4). The result is the formation of a 24-hour society (Hassan and Purser 2007), whose social costs ‘are ultimately externalized to workers and their families’ (Reisch 2001, 370) and construct unequal ‘power-chronographies’ (Sharma 2014).

Forms of time-related disadvantage in post-industrial societies have been studied in social sciences resorting to concepts such as ‘time poverty’, ‘time bind’, or ‘time famine’ (e.g. Hochschild 1997, Perlow 1999, Vickery 1977), and showing their unequal distribution along the lines of class and gender (e.g. Boersma 2016, Turner and Grieco 1998, Warren 2003). Contributions focusing on the preconditions for more equitable temporal regimes focus on concepts such as time sovereignty (Garhammer 1995), temporal justice (Goodin 2010), and time wealth (Reisch 2001; Rinderspacher 2012, 1988).

That last concept, time wealth, is particularly relevant for understanding the working conditions of PT workers. Time wealth is a multidimensional construct emerging from a series of interrelated facets, including the individuals’ availability of (a) sufficient time to carry out the desired/necessary activities (chronometric dimension); (b) time ‘at the right time of the day or week or season according to […] one’s personal rhythms, the various natural rhythms (e.g. seasons), and social rhythms (e.g. festivities)’ (Reisch 2001, 377) (chronologic dimension); (c) time that is synchronized ‘with the time constraints and rhythms of significant others such as family, friends as well as with time institutions and infrastructure of society (opening hours, school hours, etc.)’ (Reisch 2001, 378) (synchronization dimension); (d) possibilities for ‘self-determination, as much as possible, of the temporal position and sequence of leisure and obligations, as well as their adjustment to individual and collective rhythms’ (Garhammer 1995, 176–177), including the chance to plan one’s own time in advance (time sovereignty dimension).

Enjoying one’s time wealth does not only mean ‘having enough time’. Rather, it involves the subjective experience of (and satisfaction with) activities’ duration, frequency, tempo, temporal location, quality, and predictability. The way in which working time is planned, managed and used affects time wealth for workers and thus conditions their possibilities for time use and general well-being. Crucially, time wealth and its dimensions are unequally distributed, especially to the detriment of women and working-class households (Warren 2003). Socio-temporal processes appear to rely on and reproduce such inequalities. For instance, as research on acceleration in contemporary societies has shown, to maintain the current ‘culture of speed’, the labour of unprivileged temporalities is often needed (Sharma 2017). Such dynamics also affect mobile practices, including the design, timing, production, and experience of PT.

The temporalities of public transport operations

The temporality of PT has been investigated mainly from the point of view of users: travel time-use, duration, speed, frequency, spatio-temporal coverage and their relation to urban rhythms and people’s access needs have seen a growing interest in transport and mobility studies (e.g. Neutens et al. 2010; McArthur, Robin, and Smeds 2019). However, the reliance of PT on punctuality and clock time is of great relevance for workers too. To guarantee reliability for users, PT drivers are required to follow timetables, with a very limited margin of error, which ‘reflect the rationalization of time use and the scarcity of time as a basic work resource’ (Blyton et al. 2017, 6), subjecting workers to a strict ‘time discipline’ (5). Research on railway workers quoted in
Blyton et al. (2017, 5) (Cottrell 1939; McKenna 1980) describes the ‘tyranny of time’ railroaders are subjected to, both during and outside working hours, by ‘the rigidity of the timetable (…) and the unrelenting time discipline it demanded’. The time bind is even more stressful in the case of urban bus drivers, who must deal with the tension between the rigidity of PT timetables and the dynamicity and unpredictability of urban road networks. The specific temporal configurations of PT work have been studied by health and occupational scholars, who have brought attention to the risks for physical and mental health related to tight schedules, long working hours, low control over working time, and insufficient rest breaks. These circumstances require workers to adapt urination or fluid intake to the break schedule, which in turn leads to a number of negative psychosocial work conditions, cardiovascular risks and overall stress (Anund et al. 2018; Dobson, Choi, and Schnall 2017; Ihlström, Kecklund, and Anund 2017). As a result, PT drivers often suffer from work-non-work balance problems (Åkerstedt and Kecklund 2017), and persistent fatigue and sleepiness are extremely common in this profession (Maynard et al. 2021).

However, the rigidity of schedules influences only part of the temporal stress experienced by bus drivers. More attention needs to be paid to the socio-economic context in which such a job is carried out. McIntyre (2005) studies occupational illness and injuries as ‘embodied forms of alienated labour’ that result from the capitalist labour process, dominated by the managerial prerogative to define efficiency in accordance with management and production goals. More recently, the testimony of a London Underground worker (Hughes, Dobbins, and Murphy 2019) describes fluid boundaries between managerial control and workers’ autonomy, including control over their worktime. It shows how work power relations are shifting yet embedded in a specific socio-economic context, that of, among other aspects, ‘modernization’ of transport services towards a customer orientation and of government cuts to PT authorities. In addition, the PT sector is globally male-dominated and highly gender segregated (Wright 2014, 2019), as women engaged in care work find it even more challenging to withstand atypical working times that working in PT involves, especially when combined with lack of safe transport options to and from work (International Transport Workers’ Federation and International Association of Public Transport, 2019). This suggests, among other things, the unsuitability of transport work to the temporal needs of women in contemporary societies, characterized by unequal gendered division of unpaid care and domestic work.

**Procured public transport in Sweden**

In Sweden, PT operation is mostly procured to private companies based on competitive tendering. Regional Public Transport Authorities (RPTAs) have ‘responsibility for the strategic planning of public transport, including defining service supply’ (Paulsson, Hylander, and Hrelja 2017, 2297–8) and are required to produce Regional Transport Provision Programs (RTPPs) that cover ‘both commercial services and services to be contracted’ (van de Velde 2014, 35) for urban, rural, and inter-urban PT within the region. In 2020, 19 out of 21 RPTAs used competitive tendering to award operation contracts, either based on scoring or lower price mechanisms (Ridderstedt and Pyddoke 2021).

Public procurement is promoted by the European Union as a crucial market-based instrument applied to ‘achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth while ensuring the most efficient use of public funds’ (European Parliament 2014, 65). In Sweden, the procurement of PT is thought to support the achievement of RPTAs’ objectives in the most financially efficient way. The RTPPs of both Stockholm (Stockholm Region 2022) and Västra Götaland region of which Gothenburg is the capital (Västra Götaland Region 2021) identify several common objectives: increasing the modal share of PT (focusing on geographical accessibility, ease of usage, safety perception, inclusiveness, and competitiveness), lowering its environmental impact, introducing ‘smart’ PT systems and planning reliable PT services to facilitate regional
growth, attractiveness and cohesion. For instance, according to a document published by the Stockholm Region (n.d., 8), procured PT is expected to guarantee ‘environment-friendly, punctual and accessible journeys’ and its operation is advertised as creating ‘excellent opportunities for very profitable business’. The operators are expected to pursue cost-effectiveness while preserving service quality and are paid by the RPTA based on, for instance, ‘travel incentives (numbers of passengers), kilometres driven, punctuality, revenues, customer satisfaction, and value-preserving maintenance’ (Stockholm Region n.d., 8).

The procurement agreements do not set specific contract terms pertaining to labour conditions as, according to the Swedish National Agency for Public Procurement (2019), there is a low risk of unfair working conditions for bus drivers in procured PT. According to this institution, bus drivers in PT are covered by the bus sector agreement (Bussbranschavtal), a collective agreement between the Swedish Bus and Coach Federation (Sveriges Bussföretag) and the Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union (Kommunal) that regulates, among others, working times (2021). However, according to trade unions representing PT workers, as the policy procurement favours companies that submit the lowest bids and offer to reduce costs, it has deteriorated the working conditions and security, while increasing overall costs and generating ‘a systematic shortage of staff’ (Åkersten, Klemetsson, and Södergren Poikulainen 2019).

**Methods**

Our analysis builds on nine individual semi-structured interviews with bus drivers in March and April 2021. All interviewees expressed informed consent to participate in the study. Prior to data collection, we conducted a preliminary interview with an experienced driver and trade union representative, who also guided us in a visit to a depot and to a breakroom in Gothenburg in March 2021; on this occasion, we made observations, carried out informal conversations with several bus drivers, and distributed flyers with information about the study and how to participate. Trade unions helped us share recruitment information online, too. Each participant received a gift card.

The drivers interviewed are employees of PT networks in the metropolitan area of either Gothenburg (two interviewees) or Stockholm (seven interviewees). Each of these PT networks is relatively dense, and besides buses includes several other modes, such as trains and ferries (in both regions), trams (in Gothenburg), and metro (in Stockholm). We focus on drivers operating buses on predominantly intra-urban routes, shorter than 50 kilometres long, and therefore subject to the same working time regulation according to the sector collective agreement. At the time of our study, all our interviewees were employed by Keolis Sverige, part of Keolis Group, a multinational company operating PT in 15 countries across four continents. Keolis Sverige employs approximately 4500 workers in the regions of Stockholm, Västra Götaland, Värmland and Dalarna.

Our respondents have different levels of work experience and follow diverse working-time arrangements. Their family situation and engagement in care work is heterogeneous: some live alone, others with their partners and some have small children. Out of nine interviewees, seven identify as men and two as women. At the time of our research, the youngest interviewee was 41 years old, yet the majority (five interviewees) were aged 60 or older. The composition of the participants’ group does not allow us to conduct a more in-depth analysis of gender-, age- and context-related differences among respondents. The limited number of interviews might depend on time constraints related both to the workers’ busy schedules and the research project’s limited duration. Crucially, all interviewees appeared accustomed to discussing their work environment, demonstrating clear knowledge of regulation regarding their working times. Most of drivers articulated some kind of dissatisfaction with their labour conditions.
The interviews were analysed using a deductive thematic analysis based on the different dimensions of time wealth, with the aim of understanding how the spatialities and temporalities of work in procured PT were experienced by bus drivers.

**Spatio-temporalities of work in procured public transport**

To begin exploring the working conditions in PT, let us join the bus drivers on their typical working day in Gothenburg and Stockholm. In both metropolitan areas, the drivers usually begin their shift at a depot, although sometimes they need to board their vehicle at a specific bus stop. Each worker registers their arrival to the depot by scanning their driving license. Next, they print out their daily duty schedule, which outlines the routes they follow and the buses they drive, transfer times between different vehicles, exact departure and arrival times, as well as pauses and breaks. A shift can involve changing vehicles and routes several times, which Interviewee G calls ‘Kangaroo-shifts’, as they require the driver to ‘jump’ from one bus to another fairly often. After registering and printing the schedule, the driver has precisely six minutes to reach the bus and prepare it for departure: adjusting the seats and mirrors, unplugging the gas, water, and air pipes, taking the breathalyser test, starting the bus, and switching on the on-board computer.

Once the bus is ready, the driver leaves the depot. They spend most of the shift in various vehicles. From their seat, the driver can access the on-board computer that indicates the route number, punctuality, distance to the next stop, and incoming communication from the traffic management office. The driver’s compartment is equipped with a breath alcohol ignition interlock device, radio-communication system, GPS, silent alarm button, surveillance cameras, and ticketing machine.

Before reaching the limit of two and a half hours of continuous driving, the driver has the right to a pause (paus) or break (rast). A pause can last at least 10 minutes, must be scheduled and located in a place with access to a toilet (Swedish Bus and Coach Federation and Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union 2021, par. 7). Breaks are unpaid and cannot exceed 90 minutes per shift. A break of 30 to 90 minutes must be planned after maximum five hours of consecutive work (op. cit., par. 12). Whereas pauses are included in the working time, breaks are not. The time frame (ramtid) from the start of the shift to its end, including breaks and pauses, cannot exceed 13 hours for drivers operating regular passenger services. After their shift is over, drivers are entitled to a daily rest of at least 11 consecutive hours (dygnsvila), which includes the commute to and from home.

Although the work time is regulated by the bus sector agreement, bus drivers can have diverse working-time arrangements. The usual working time amounts to an average of 40 hours per week. However, both daily and weekly number of hours, pauses and breaks can vary substantially. The drivers can express their preferences in this regard via the ‘time search’ system (tidsökning). According to the individual working-time arrangements assigned, workers can start their shift at different times of the day. Crucially, they might work on consecutive shifts or on split shifts. Keolis workers in Sweden follow different types of consecutive shifts, the most common of which is the uttjänst, which is the first early morning shift, starting around 4 AM and ending in the early afternoon. Other consecutive shifts include the mellantjänst (starting in the late morning, around 9 AM or later), intjänst (starting around 3 PM and ending in the evening), and the night shift (starting around 9 PM until approximately 7 AM). Unlike consecutive shifts, split shifts apply during peak hours only. When assigned split shifts, workers begin the first part of the shift in the early morning, followed by unpaid nonworking time (uppehåll) of at least 90 minutes, which usually lasts between three and five hours. The use of this nonworking time among drivers varies: whether it is spent for rest, care work or other activities typically depends how far from their home they are left in-between the split shift. Afterwards, they return for the second part of the shift for several hours in the afternoon. As one of our interviewees explains:
'Today I started at 6:36 and I worked until 9:59. Then I have a break and start later at 13:39. And then I drive until 18:36' (Interviewee E).

If the shift does not end where it begun, the driver can reach the starting point by taking a bus driven by their colleague. Occasionally, the timing of the shift makes this impossible: ‘[Today,] I started before public transport [operated] and finished after public transport [operated]’ (Interviewee H). Additionally, while necessary transfers by PT during the shifts are paid by the employer, any trips made by PT before and after work must be paid by the workers themselves. As a result, some drivers use their own mode of transport to facilitate their mobility before, during and after work. One interviewee ‘acquired a folding bike … [which] gives a little extra exercise even if it is awkward’ (Interviewee G), as they carry it around during the shift.

The bus drivers perform their work in multiple spaces. These include the depot, spaces designated for breaks as well as the vehicle and the multitude of spaces it traverses and reaches. During pauses, breaks and unpaid time between split shifts, they have access to toilets, pause rooms, break rooms, and nap rooms with ‘beds, […] blankets and pillows where one can go to bed if they have one hour break’ (Interviewee C). They may also use lunchrooms, fully equipped gyms with changing rooms and a sauna. However, as a bus drivers’ work environment is essentially mobile, we argue it also includes urban spaces through which the buses move, notably the streets and the bus stops. Road surface, street lightning, the design and condition of bus stops, traffic congestion and accidents, roadworks and closures, weather conditions—they all affect the drivers’ work environment, their safety and well-being as well as the perception thereof, their ability to perform their work, and their capacity to provide a service to PT passengers.

**Bus drivers’ time wealth**

The working conditions of the bus drivers in Gothenburg and Stockholm can be further understood by looking at the drivers’ time wealth—a perspective we explore in the remainder of the paper. When asked about their job satisfaction, many of our informants highlighted its advantages: the relationship with their colleagues (Interviewee A), the satisfaction related to their passion for driving large vehicles (Interviewee C; Interviewee G), and the feeling for performing a rewarding job (Interviewee D) that is geared towards helping others (Interviewee F; Interviewee G). One of our respondents declares unequivocal love for their profession:

> I love the job, […] it’s the most fun job I’ve had in my whole life. I love meeting passengers […] . I think it’s a lot of fun to manoeuvre these monsters in traffic, […] to get through tricky passages without scratching the bus, to see happy faces when I lower the bus for a walker or a pram, […] to be there for people […]. It’s great fun. I love it. (Interviewee G)

However, what the drivers often denounce is the temporal aspect of their job: ‘What I do not love, it is the working hours – not only that I work certain times, but how the times are arranged on the schedule’ (Interviewee G).

To address this contradiction, throughout this section we demonstrate how PT bus drivers experience the duration, sequence, and location of their work and rest organizing our findings following the dimensions of time wealth outlined previously.

**Chronometric dimension: experiencing insufficient time for working, resting, and commuting**

Albeit they appear generally satisfied with their work and the spaces it embraces, the drivers experience considerable pressure and stress, as an insufficient amount of time is allocated to transfers, pauses, breaks and, last but not least, driving the bus. Once on the bus, the drivers are constantly monitored against their punctuality, as the on-board computer reports any delay: ‘We have our little clocks here that tick: ‘plus zero’, and ‘plus two’, or ‘plus four’… then a warning
ticks. Oops, now it’s too early, I need to stop here. Otherwise [the company] gets fined because it becomes a cancelled departure’ (Interviewee F). The time scheduled between stops is often too short and ‘optimistic, to say the least’ (Interviewee G). For instance, ‘one should be 11:39 at three bus stops at the same time. […] I suspect that the time between bus stops is calculated without passengers’ (Interviewee F). Indeed, the schedule often appears to not consider real-life conditions, underestimating the time required for passengers to board and alight the bus, as well as traffic conditions.

Formally, drivers are encouraged by the company not to worry about slight delays. Regardless of official company policy, drivers report that delays cause significant stress, as they may lead to cutting their break time or missing one entirely, or preventing a colleague from taking a much-needed rest. As a result, they often prefer to skip the pause or break for fear of affecting passengers and colleagues: ‘In case of delay, you certainly have the right to postpone your departure time. But […] 99% of us do not [do this]. We try to go on time. [Therefore,] in reality, you just have [enough] time to run to the toilet and back again. [Otherwise] you [would] be late [right from the beginning of the route] and it is shameful […] [Passengers] waiting at the first stop […] expect the bus to go on time’ (Interviewee G).

Even if no delay occurs, the drivers perceive the time allocated for pauses as too short. The pauses, usually 10 minutes long, do not enable workers to rest, especially since they often entail transferring from the bus to the pause room and back. As this reduces the pause time to mere six minutes, ‘there can’t be any resting’ (Interviewee B). Often, the drivers are forced to choose between using the toilet or briefly socializing with the colleagues. Put simply, ‘during the pauses one must choose between speaking with colleagues or go to the toilet’ (Interviewee H). Three of our interviewees report that some colleagues spend the pause on board the bus. Many drivers use this time to inspect the bus, ‘which means that you end up looking after the bus instead of looking after yourself’ (Interviewee G). Those who have worked in Gothenburg’s and Stockholm’s PT for a long time explain that the time pressure has been increasing in recent years: ‘before we had eight minutes, now we have six’ (Interviewee G). Less than a decade ago, drivers could take pauses of up to 15 minutes (Interviewee H). As lunch breaks were longer, too, some drivers would be able to return home to rest (Interviewee A).

Drivers have limited agency to respond to the ever-increasing time pressure. Some choose to ‘to walk fast or to come 3–4 minutes earlier to work’ (Interviewee F) or to perform some preparatory tasks ahead of their shift. As a result, ‘they start working before the working time, so they work for free. They work for free to […] reduce their stress’ (Interviewee G). Others attempt to negotiate with the bus company, notably with the help of workers’ unions: ‘I wrote and spoke to the boss and to the union – who can poo in six minutes after two and a half hours? […] But if I write a report then [the PT company] will just say that [there is] a contract with the union for six minutes. It doesn’t matter if I complain and write a report […] the law [says] six minutes’. (Interviewee I).

**Chronologic dimensions: adjusting bodily and social rhythms to variable working times**

Besides the time pressure resulting from the insufficient amount of time allocated for work and rest activities (chronometric dimension), conflicts can arise between the varying working times and the workers’ bodily and social rhythms (chronologic dimension). Their disruption is reported by nearly all our respondents. The main factor behind it lies in the variability of working shifts, in terms of both their length and timing. According to one of our informants, the constant changes to how shifts are arranged derives from the PT company policy, and is directly related to how the company’s management perceives and enacts policies geared towards workforce efficiency:

There has been more stress […] precisely because the company has become more efficient in getting the working hours out. […] They have found that it is more efficient […] that we have very long shifts [on]
some days and then short shifts [on] other days. It has meant a huge dissatisfaction: you are neither safe in traffic, nor you feel well when sitting behind the wheel for nine hours. And it cannot be compensated with shorter days. (Interviewee B)

The resultant working-time arrangements are increasingly complex, making it difficult for the drivers to establish work-life routines:

If you work four hours one day, then it means that you have to work nine hours four days to get an average of eight and there are people who go on their knees just because these long services suck the must out of them. […] One third of all shifts receive such long shifts and it’s a huge problem (Interviewee B).

Sometimes […] I start at 10 AM [and work until] 7–8 PM, today I start at 1 PM [and work until] 9 PM, and some services start at 1 PM until 1:30 AM in the middle of the night. […] It is always different. (Interviewee I).

As a result, the drivers experience strong fatigue and ‘sleep is affected by it too’ (Interviewee I). They express a clear preference for working in a more fixed and systemic time regime:

I would want a more constant level of working days. It should not be 10 hours here and five hours there, as [it is] for many drivers today. (Interviewee F)

I would have preferred [the working time] to be a little shorter every day, instead of one that is very short, [while] the rest [is] very long […] There are many who find it very difficult. (Interviewee E)

We work a bit less during the night. I think we work 37.4 hours a week, but we have a 6 week-scheme, so it can differ really much: during a week I can [work] 44 hours, and another [week] I can [work] 28 hours. We have complained about it, one feels it in the body when it is such a big difference. (Interviewee C)

The PT driver’s rhythms are further disturbed by the temporal location of breaks (which include lunch breaks and last usually 30 minutes). For instance, as a break can be scheduled as soon as two hours from the start of the shift, workers who begin working early in the morning have to take the lunch break relatively early, too: ‘If we start at 6 AM [we may] have lunch at 10 or 11 AM […] Yesterday I took the lunch break at 8:30 AM’ (Interviewee D). Unpaid 90-minute breaks can be scheduled during night shifts, creating problems for those who are not used to working at night regularly: ‘It is devastating for most people, they get tired […] They have problems with sleep, I hear it all the time’ (Interviewee C).

Synchronization: striving for quality leisure time and work-life balance

The synchronization dimension refers to the ability to find a balance between work obligations and the rhythms of family and friends. Work-life balance is extremely difficult to achieve for our interviewees. A first facet of this disturbance can be identified in the fact that they commonly perform work-related tasks outside official working hours:

We are paid for the time we actually drive the bus, so everything around it like studying and reading information on the routes, applying for vacation, and applying for the ‘time search’ has to be done during one’s free time, even though it belongs to the job. It is a real dispute that has been around for a long time. (Interviewee B).

As there is no time designated for these work-related tasks, drivers are forced to perform them in their free time or during pauses, making the time allocated to rest even shorter. This phenomenon has been further exacerbated by the use of digital tools. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic PT companies in Gothenburg and Stockholm used digital platforms to organise workers’ training and education. As a result, while the drivers feel that ‘you are always connected [and] can read information whenever you want’ (Interviewee F), they are subjected to constant pressure to remain available and alert. Digitalisation of their activities also comes at the expense of interaction with colleagues: ‘everything is your own responsibility. Like a self-employed person, you can say’ (Interviewee F).
The drivers further report that extreme tiredness and stress makes it difficult for them to enjoy free time, dedicate themselves to leisure activities, or spend time with family and friends.

You just go home and eat and tell the kids that no, we get to hang out tomorrow, I must sleep. [...] Considering that you sit in between six and ten hours fully focused on the traffic, you are mentally tired when you get home. (Interviewee H)

Many [drivers] come home and are completely exhausted, and that affects the family. [...] In this job you should be a driver who is just [...] married to work, if you understand what I mean, and you should not have children. You should preferably be single and a workaholic. (Interviewee D)

The lack of leisure time is particularly evident in the case of one our interlocutors, whose commute is particularly long: ‘Leisure? (…). The only thing I do on my workdays, in general, I get out of bed, I eat breakfast and go to work, I work, I go home, I go to bed. That’s the only thing I do on my workdays’ (Interviewee G). Some workers and their families have tried to adapt to this situation in search of better synchronization and work-life balance. For example, a driver who works on split shifts and lives close to home uses their daily break to ‘catch up’ with housework:

I am often the one who goes to sleep first at home […]. For this reason, I try to do things in my free time in the middle of the day instead, which could be do the dishes or grocery shopping and so on. […] I go home. It is for sure worse for those who work far from home […] if they work split shifts. Well, it is very tiring for them, but it works for me. (Interviewee E)

Similarly, an interviewee who works on night shifts describes how their family adapts its free time activities to the driver’s working times:

It is a choice I made to work at night, and the family has finally acknowledged [this]. […] In the first years, they thought they missed me […] because I just slept, but I was strict and […] demanded my sleep. […] Obviously, I miss things. […] But there’s not much that can be done about it. The children have postponed parties and stuff for the grandchildren, so that now it’s at 3 PM instead of 12 PM, and that’s for my sake. (Interviewee C)

**Time sovereignty: short advance-notice about working times, and daily schedules to be followed to the minute**

The final aspect of the PT drivers’ job we explore concerns their time sovereignty, defined as the capacity to decide about one’s work and non-work times, and to plan them in advance. In both Gothenburg and Stockholm, while the drivers can express their preferences about working times in the ‘time search’ system, the final decision is taken by the PT company and its ‘personnel planning officer’ (personalplanerare). These uneven power relations reverberate in a worker’s complaint: ‘I write my wish, but it is not certain that I will get it, it is maybe 80% of what I want I get, it is not much to choose’ (Interviewee A). Another worker explains that if they receive a shift plan that they are unable to follow, ‘there is no 100% guarantee’ (Interviewee H) that a change request gets approved.

Knowing in advance about their weekly schedule allows workers to better plan their time. The advance-notice time period depends on the kind of working-time arrangement: shifts can be fixed or flexible. When working on a fixed shift, the drivers apply for their working time once a year and keep the same schedule all year. If they work on a flexible shift, the drivers need to either apply to the ‘time search’, or even to the ‘daily search’. While in the past the ‘time search’ would allow the drivers to learn about the timeframe of their shifts as early as seven months before the start of a six-week work period (Interviewee A), this notice has been reduced to only two weeks. Those using the ‘daily search’ get informed about the timing of shift only one to three days in advance. Understandably, this leads to complaints: ‘I do not think [two weeks] is enough […]. I would like people to apply for their service once a year, how it [used to be] before the time search system [was implemented]’ (Interviewee H).
Time sovereignty is further limited by the tight duty schedule that defines a precise sequence of driving times, pauses, breaks, and transfers. Having a clear schedule can have its benefits because it demarcates the boundaries of the workday:

When you park your bus or as it is taken over [by a colleague], then you can sort of cut all ties, then you have done your thing and it's quite nice, actually. You know what your working day will look like. I have a schedule: you know exactly when and where and how. [...] There are benefits to it, actually (Interviewee E).

The workers are required to follow the duty schedule rigorously to the minute, to guarantee the punctuality of the service. While this ensures a reliable service for passengers, this micro-scheduling confronts PT workers with a serious limitation of their ability to determine the use of one's own time, including during pauses and breaks:

It's not like [being] an office clerk who has a half an hour break. They can go to the toilet once they please, do not have to wait until they arrive at a toilet. Or [they can] run out into the kitchen and put the food in the microwave during working hours and then run back again and work before they start the break. I cannot do such things. [...] I'm a slave [...] The problem is that with these duty lists [...] I can [end up] bouncing between the buses like a kangaroo. And, also, I have very short breaks. [...] Last Sunday [...] I had to change seven [buses] [and] I had two breaks: one was 31 minutes long and the other was 32 minutes long. So, I could not eat properly all day (Interviewee G).

Discussion and conclusions

The question of well-being and agency of transport workers in the global North remains severely under-researched by mobilities scholars. To begin addressing it from the mobilities perspective, in this paper we explored the plight of bus drivers employed in PT in Gothenburg and Stockholm, two metropolitan areas in Sweden—a country where Regional Public Transport Authorities, responsible for the provision of PT, predominantly procure their services to private companies, with the aim of achieving better operational efficiency. As procurement strategies are common in other geographical contexts, notably in Denmark, the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom (Molander 2018), we wanted to understand how the 'efficiency imperative' affects the temporalities of work in procured PT. Addressing the unequal outcomes of transport policies and decisions from a temporal perspective, we investigated whether the increasing market- and costumer-orientation of PT results in further burdens placed on the workers in terms of time pressure, disruptions to work-life balance, and lack of control on their own time—that is, in terms of their time wealth.

We have detected several aspects pertaining to bus drivers’ experience of their labour, suggesting that the workers’ and trade unions’ claim of a severe deterioration of working conditions in procured PT might be connected to the ‘efficiency imperative’ that characterizes it. Previous research emphasised that the temporality of work in PT is characterized by rhythms that are rigidly marked by timetables and that often conflict with social and bodily rhythms. In our study, we observed that the already complex temporality of work in PT is made even more unrelenting by the need to maximize the efficiency of operations. The workers we interviewed suffer from an increased sense of time pressure and encounter obstacles in managing their work-life balance, expressing concerns about their well-being at work. Future research could focus on further investigating this deterioration process, possibly addressing crucial developments in sector agreements.

Moreover, the spatio-temporality of work in procured PT exposes bus drivers to transport disadvantage, as they follow ever-changing non-standard hours and shifts, beginning and ending in locations that are often inaccessible without a private motorised means. Nonetheless, albeit they have limited control over their working schedule, many of our interviewees are far from...
accepting their position: they critically examine their working conditions and attempt to improve them, even if they often fail to gather sufficient bargaining power.

Thus, as the agency of transport workers is severely undermined, we argued the efficiency and comfort of PT services for (some) passengers is achieved through policies that cause increased exhaustion among PT workers. Admittedly, the policy of procuring PT to private operators is geared toward ensuring the networks’ financial efficiency while responding to passengers’ temporal and spatial needs, providing better temporal coverage, reliability, and overall attractiveness of the service. Yet, our findings indicate that achieving these objectives to make transport more sustainable for passengers is produced through eroding the sustainability of labour conditions of transport workers. Moreover, as poor working conditions and fatigue can compromise safety for both drivers and passengers, future research could explore further how the well-being of both these groups is affected by the customer orientation towards PT passengers (Vitrano and Lindkvist 2022). Such an orientation emphasizes aspects related to user satisfaction and service quality, depoliticizing communication between PT users and workers, and failing to recognize the societal value of PT work.

We argue that our findings highlight the urgency of starting a crucial conversation among critical transport and mobilities scholars, placing the workers as key actors that must be involved in further reflections on inequalities and injustices in both transport studies (Kęblowski, Dobruszkes, and Boussauw 2022) and mobilities (Sheller 2018). Our research demonstrates that time wealth is a vital dimension of transport and mobility (in)justice, which regards not only how transport systems improve or hinder time wealth, but also how time wealth is distributed. The usual goals of PT in terms of providing speed, reliability, time sovereignty, and time quality to its users should not be reached at the expense of transport workers. This leads us to the hypothesis—to be tested in further studies—that the current procurement procedures and the criteria on which they are based effectively hinder the realization of a truly sustainable and just PT. Further explorations of these dynamics should capture the multiple dimensions of workers’ well-being beyond the specific question of time wealth (e.g. issues related to wages, employment contracts, and health) in relation to the multiplicity of workers contributing to the functioning of PT networks, including both on-board workers (e.g. drivers, conductors, cleaners) and less visible ones (e.g. technicians, mechanics, dispatchers).

Thus, put simply, it is high time that our field seriously considered the well-being of mobility workers, placing them front and centre in our research agendas, exploring their livelihoods, working conditions and agency in diverse geographical settings, engaged in transport services across the spectrum of in/formality.

**Notes**

1. All participants received written and oral information on the study aims, data protection, and possibility to withdraw at any stage. As most interviews were carried out remotely, informed consent to participate was mostly verbal (recorded) and, in one case, written. According to the Swedish Law on Ethical Review, the study did not need to undergo an ethical review as it did not collect sensitive personal data nor used methods that could affect or harm the participants physically or psychologically. As no participant is identifiable, no written consent to publish was needed and, hence, was not obtained from participants.


3. In order to protect the participants’ anonymity, we will use the singular ‘they’ pronoun when presenting the results.

4. This time was reduced from 3.5 hours to 2.5 after a major bus drivers’ strike in 1999, in which they demanded a 10-minute pause every hour. Source: [https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/9902/25/buss4.html](https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/9902/25/buss4.html). Accessed June 28, 2023.

5. In the case of Stockholm, only one unpaid break can be placed in a shift.

6. The weekly rest must be of at least 35 hours under a seven-day period (veckovila) (Swedish Bus and Coach Federation and Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union 2021).
Acknowledgements

We wish to wholeheartedly thank the interviewees for kindly devoting their precious time to our study. We would also like to express our sincere thanks to: Karin Alfredsson for her work on data collection; the Kommunal trade union representatives for support during the study; the participants in the K2 research seminar ‘Labour in Public Transport’, especially Anna Anund and Alexander Paulsson, for comments on earlier versions of this paper; and the anonymous reviewers who provided generous and constructive comments. Needless to say, any arguments advanced in the article remain the authors’ sole responsibility.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Research on this publication has been supported by by K2 – The Swedish Knowledge Centre for Public Transport [Project number 2020018] and by FWO (Research Foundation – Flanders) grant numbers G079720N and 1262821 N.

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