
Miroljub IGNJATOVIĆ*

POSSIBLE WAYS TO PROTECT THE INTERESTS OF PLATFORM WORKERS**

Abstract. *The article examines the transformation of power relations in the platform economy and ways to protect the interests of platform workers under algorithmic control. With critical analysis of the concepts of precarisation and control (Kalleberg et al., Edwards, Foucault), digital labour platforms are shown to create new forms of dependency and insecurity, yet also new opportunities for resistance. Four levels of interest protection are identified: individual and collective resistance tactics, the establishment of platform cooperatives, organised collective representation, and legislative measures by states and the EU. In the conclusion, emphasis is given to the need for collective, technological and legal spheres to act in unison to ensure decent work in the digital age.*

Keywords: *digital labour platforms, platform work, precarisation, control, algorithms, collective bargaining.*

INTRODUCTION

Workers in labour markets, especially digital labour platforms, face a significant decline in their negotiating power following the systematic precarisation and de-standardisation of work. Algorithmic management adds to this in the way asymmetric relationships are reinforced by reducing transparency while making the individual carry the associated market and social risks. This new configuration of power limits workers' ability to contest working conditions, making them subjects of obscure and automated decision-making processes.

In this conceptual and review-oriented article, these dynamics are examined by drawing on foundational theories of labour market precarisation (Kalleberg), workplace control (Edwards), and power and resistance (Foucault). Some empirical evidence from different authors concerning ways to protect interests is considered with respect to four scales: individual and collective tactics of resistance against algorithms; the forming of platform cooperatives; the organising

* Miroljub Ignjatović, PhD, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, miroljub.ignjatovic@fdv.uni-lj.si.

** Research article.
DOI: 10.51936/tip.63.2.277

of collective representation; and the implementation of legislation by bodies like the state and the EU. The central thesis is that protecting the interests of platform workers calls for an integrated approach that connects their individual and collective action, the demand for algorithmic transparency, and the legislative establishment of normative frameworks to rebalance power in contemporary industrial relations.

The structure of the article is as follows. In the second section, the main factors in the ever-worse position of (especially platform) workers in today's labour markets are considered: digital labour platforms, the precarisation of labour markets, and control, which is a key component of industrial relations, in particular a new manifestation of it – algorithmic control, together with the consequences of work involving digital platforms and algorithmic control. The third section investigates several strategies for platform workers to improve the asymmetrical power balance in the labour markets. Finally, in section four, some conclusions are drawn regarding realistic ways for assuring that the interests of platform workers are protected.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND ALGORITHMS OF CONTROL – THE PRECARISATION OF THE LABOUR MARKET CONTINUES

Digital platforms

The development of information, communication and digital technologies over the past 50 years has dramatically transformed economies and societies, with digital technologies today being fundamental infrastructure in a modern society. The impact of this (and other trends) on the labour market is seen in the reshaping of work organisation, the changed relationship between the main actors (those demanding and supplying labour, and new intermediaries), and, not least, the rise of precarisation and new forms of alienation and exploitation. A key manifestation of such changes is the emergence of digital labour platforms and the new forms of work associated with them: platform work. These platforms are used in various sectors of the economy since digital infrastructure provides their owner with considerable flexibility and profitability.

For example, Uber

benefits from an unprecedented combination of flexibility and efficient coordination made possible by the ubiquity of cell-phone ownership, the digital mapping of human infrastructure, and the ingenuity of the algorithms powering their platform, affording them the autonomous management of drivers. (Fiori 2017, 321)

Digital labour platforms are defined as:

private internet-based companies that act as intermediaries, with greater or lesser extent of control, for on-demand services requested by individual

or corporate consumers. The services are provided directly or indirectly by natural persons, irrespective of whether such services are performed in the physical or online world. (de Groen et al. 2021, 7)

The International Labour Organisation splits digital labour platforms into two broad categories: online and location-based. With *online platforms*, workers perform work via the internet or remotely. Work here may be more complex or short-term, such as content moderation. With *location-based platforms*, workers perform work in person at certain physical locations, concerning areas like transport, delivery and home services, domestic work and care (ILO 2021, 18). Although their business models differ, both groups encounter information asymmetry: workers generally do not know the details of the algorithms used to rank, allocate tasks and set prices (ILO 2021, 3–4, 9–11), nor the legislation that might allow them find out about this information, to ‘open up the black box’.

Recent data from the “Study to support the impact assessment of a possible EU initiative to the application of competition rules to collective bargaining by self-employed” (European Commission 2022, 13) paint an interesting picture of EU states. About half of all platform workers work at a location they must physically attend, while the other half work online. Location-based work is typically associated with low-skilled and poorly paid work, and online work with high skills. While the share of people engaged in platform work among the active workforce is still relatively small, it is growing rapidly (ibid., 43), which reveals the platform economy is becoming ever more important.

Precarisation¹ of the Labour Market

The platform economy’s increased significance might also be a cause for concern since platform work often requires considerable flexibility from workers, remote work, or spatial dispersal, and entails a high level of insecurity due to workers’ isolation, low pay and poor working conditions, unclear employment status, and related lack of social rights. We can thus conclude that “the rapid growth trend and the success of the platform-economy business model are grounded in the de-standardisation and precarisation of work and the externalisation of business costs and risks” (Kanjua Mrčela and Črtalič 2020, 554).

The key indicators of precarisation identified by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989, 3) several decades ago remain relevant to the platform economy:

- employment insecurity – work is made flexible, performed with neither a long-term stable contract nor a guaranteed volume of work;
- low incomes – jobs with modest incomes are considered precarious if they are associated with poverty and social exclusion;

¹ “By this term we mean work that is uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which *employees bear the risks of work* (as opposed to businesses or the government) and *receive limited social benefits and statutory protections*” (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018, 1).

- lack of control and autonomy – the more insecure the work, the less control workers (individually or collectively) have over the working conditions, pay, or pace of work; with algorithmic management exacerbating this; and
- insufficient protection – inadequate or total lack of workplace safety, legal or collective-agreement coverage, and social security.

The last indicator (insufficient protection) is responsible for especially strong precarising effects because digital labour platforms entail a triangular worker–platform–client relationship that blurs the boundaries of the platform’s authority. Subcontracting agreements and the frequently imposed status of self-employment replace the standard situation of being subject to labour law, while in practice algorithmic management (such as ratings, GPS tracking) maintains elements of economic dependency (Dieuaide and Azaïs 2020). ‘Grey zones’ in employment relations are established in this way, making traditional binary statuses inadequate for either analysing the position of workers or providing (social) protection (ibid.).

Control as an Important Component of (Industrial) Relations Between Employers and Workers

Control is a key component of the employer–worker relationship. The latter is fundamentally based on the varying, often conflicting interests of these two principal actors in industrial relations. Employers generally wish to maximise workers’ productivity while minimising the organisational costs. In contrast, workers aim to maximise their individual pay but without involving too much effort. An asymmetric power relationship between employers (and managers) and workers is apparent, whereby the former, by owning the means of production, holding financial (and political) power and having a decisive role in hiring and firing, seek to exercise full control over the production process. As Edwards (1979, 17) states: “‘Control’ is here defined as the ability of capitalists and/or managers to obtain desired work behaviour from workers”.

Edwards argues that the system of control is made up of several components that have largely stayed the same over the centuries, with the system also being important under algorithmic control, as discussed in the next subsection below (2.4):

... the system of control (in other words, the social relations of production within the firm) is thought of as a way in which three elements are coordinated:

1. Direction, or a mechanism or method by which the employer directs work tasks, specifying what needs to be done, in what order, with what degree of precision or accuracy, and in what period of time.

2. Evaluation, or a procedure whereby the employer supervises and evaluates to correct mistakes or other failures in production, to assess each worker's performance, and to identify individual workers or groups of workers who are not performing work tasks adequately.

3. Discipline, or an apparatus that the employer uses to discipline and reward workers, in order to elicit cooperation and enforce compliance with the capitalist's direction of the labour process. (Edwards 1979, 18)

Employers initially began to exercise control, among others, during the first industrial revolution and the associated technical division of labour. Via specialisation, this permitted the gradual transformation of the previously autonomous craft worker, equipped with all necessary skills at the end of the eighteenth century, to become a dependent, low-skilled Fordist worker in the early twentieth century.

Nevertheless, as declared by the one of the most important researchers of power: "Where there is power, there is resistance..." (Foucault 1978, 95). The loss of individual (or small group) power or control over one's own work was responded to by the workforce through collective action – establishing organised collective protectors of workers' interests: trade unions.

Between the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, several forms and strategies of control arose with which employers and managers gained almost complete control over the labour force. In this article, we consider two of those defined by Edwards (1979, 111–63) which exerted a substantial influence on power relations and control in twentieth-century labour markets. As shown, both provide a basis for the later development of algorithmic control in the twenty-first century.

The first form or strategy is *technical control*, which emerges from production technology itself and scientific management² as a means for assuring high productivity. Technical control is embedded in the physical and technical features of the production process – machines, factory architecture, work organisation, and the pace of production. Edwards argues technical control was the first significant step by capitalist firms to achieving structural control over workers. The central feature of this system is that control over work is no longer entirely direct and personal (dependent on factory line supervisors/managers). After the assembly line was successfully implemented by Henry Ford, technical control became institutionalised and depersonalised: the technology itself determined what a given worker must do and when. In this way, control shifted from a person (the supervisor) to a structure (technology). Edwards emphasises that this method primarily governed the first function – setting the pace and flow of work – which also limited contact between workers. As computer technologies developed,

² Taylorism and Fordism are its classic forms.

technical control expanded to include monitoring and evaluating work as well. Computers enabled 'automatic testing' where machines not simply monitored workers but also continuously assessed the quality of their work, productivity, and errors. The control process accordingly became fully automated – workers were subjected to a technical structure that appeared to operate without human intervention. For Edwards, this type of control led to a further degradation of skills and reduced worker autonomy, accelerating the formation of workers' movements and union action.

These negative consequences of technical control coupled with the dominance of service activities in developed economies in the latter half of the twentieth century made new forms of control necessary. In response came *bureaucratic control*, which supplemented the technological system with rules and procedures contained in the firm's social and organisational structure. Bureaucratic control features the institutionalisation of hierarchical power. Task allocation, work evaluation, rewards and sanctions become formalised procedures regulated by rulebooks and documented criteria. Control power hence shifts from the supervisor's personal authority to the system; to impersonal 'rules of the game' set by the organisation. Management retains control by designing these rules and procedures, while the daily direction of work processes does not depend on direct intervention by the leadership. Bureaucratic control permitted more stable and predictable company management, as well as fewer conflicts within factories. A noteworthy effect was that it introduced the appearance of 'objectivity' into work evaluation. Edwards notes that this objectivity is often illusory since it remains part of the power relation between employers and workers. Still, bureaucratic rules limited the managerial arbitrariness and created the semblance of fairness which gives managerial authority legitimacy.

Algorithms – a New Form of Labour Control

In the context presented above, many authors (Kellogg et al. 2020; Bonini and Treré 2024; Park and Ryoo 2023) view algorithms as the next phase of control in modern society.

Algorithms in the labour market:

(a) regulate the organization and execution of pre-determined, paid work activities; (b) determine the value of such work through opaque calculations; and (c) use 'productive metrics' (Beer, 2016), particularly reputation scores, as tools of control and surveillance. (Gandini 2020, 7)

Algorithmic control can be described as an upgrade of the technical and bureaucratic control of the work process (and workers). There is both *continuity* (control embedded in technology and the existence of standardised hierarchical rules) and a *break* (personalised, real-time, dispersed and opaque automated decision-making that can replace managerial structures). Algorithms add to the

scope, precision and intensity of control, yet also reduce transparency and shift risks onto workers. The power held and exercised by platforms relies precisely on workers' inability to see how the algorithms³ function. Some 'old' effects of control (intensification, fragmentation, precarisation) are then reinforced, albeit in the new conditions of digital infrastructure.

Differences are observable among authors as to the extent to which algorithmic control is viewed as distinct from earlier forms. Some refer to it as *digital Taylorism*, which "involves management's use of technology to monitor the workers to maximise efficiency in completing each task involved with a given job" (Park and Ryoo 2023, 283). Thus, it is understood as a contemporary, digitally reconfigured version of classical Taylorism (scientific management) implemented by way of the algorithmic decomposition, measurement, control and optimisation of work. Given that algorithmic management can monitor work results in real time, "productivity standards and goals are not fixed, but constantly changing, and consequently, so are pay and working conditions" (Breznik and Turnšek 2023, 10). Workers' sense of surveillance, insecurity and pressure in turn grows stronger, often leading to the dehumanisation of the labour process when decisions about workers are transferred to algorithms.

In contrast, Kellogg et al. (2020) see algorithmic control as a new form distinct from technical and bureaucratic control, chiefly due to technological innovation. Algorithms have become "a major force in allowing employers to reconfigure employer-worker relations of production within and across organisations" (ibid., 366). Their advantage and power stem from the fact that they are (ibid., 370–72):

- comprehensive – they enter many aspects of people's (working) lives and gather diverse data on workers, such as biometric data, work patterns, decision-making, and performance. Algorithms can enable more precise decisions than any previous technology, making them more comprehensive than technologies used in technical or bureaucratic control;
- instantaneous – they constantly collect and process data in real time, permitting immediate managerial decisions and worker direction;
- interactive – they allow real-time information to be exchanged via platforms and chat systems, allowing continuous feedback to workers; and
- opaque – notwithstanding their interactive potential, not much is known about them for various reasons: deliberate secrecy (company data), insufficient technical literacy needed to understand algorithms among management and notably workers, for whom algorithms truly are 'a black box'.

The authors claim that employers can use algorithms for labour control through six mechanisms they label the "6 Rs". Employers can use algorithms (ibid., 372–82) to:

³ "Platform power is a 'black-box' power" (Bonini and Treré 2024, 21).

- *direct workers* by *restricting* their behaviour and controlling them in line with the algorithmic rules⁴, and *recommending* decisions consistent with algorithm parameters;
- *evaluate workers* by *recording* and analysing their activities to adjust performance in real time, and *rating* their work; and
- *discipline workers* (where algorithms are used to hire/fire workers and to decide on and manage tasks) by *replacing* the need for human decision-making and supervision; and *rewarding*, where pay and rewards are set and controlled by predefined algorithms, or where workers or teams receive 'psychological' rewards based on algorithms (such as when work is gamified⁵).

Consequences of Work Via Digital Platforms and Algorithmic Control

In this section, a summary is provided of some of the most salient consequences of digital- platform work and algorithmic control for workers.

a) *Intensification, fragmentation, individualisation and precarisation*

Algorithmic management techniques often give workers a high degree of flexibility, variety and, occasionally, autonomy and task complexity. However, algorithmic control frequently leads to *work intensification, increased competitiveness, and the transfer of risk to workers* (such as unstable incomes and unpaid waiting time) because platforms use rankings, quotas, and dynamic pricing/tariffs to shape markets characterised by constant oversupply (Wood et al. 2019, 13). *Structural insecurity* thus follows – a feature Edwards attributes to simple control in the peripheral sector, but which today is introduced by algorithms into very different environments, including highly digitised industries (Edwards 1979, 44–45; Wood et al. 2019, 13).

Della Porta and colleagues (della Porta et al. 2022, 222–24) showed that food-delivery work exhibits at least five types of fragmentation: *legal* (individualised contractual relations among the digital worker, intermediary employer and platform mean workers are largely treated as self-employed and excluded from collective agreements), *technological* (individualised tasks are both an outcome and precondition for digital technologies – organised by an algorithm), *organisational* (platform workers are deliberately individualised and publicly rated to subject them to discipline and boost productivity), *spatial* (workers are dispersed across the urban space, making organising and solidarity actions more difficult) and *social* (platform workers are highly heterogeneous in their ethnic, educational and social characteristics, which algorithms can exploit while allocating tasks).

⁴ Algorithms often limit the information and data available to workers.

⁵ The gamification of work is the use of game-like elements, such as points, badges, leaderboards and challenges, in common work tasks to boost employee motivation, engagement, and performance.

All of these features, as already noted, lead to the precariousness of platform workers.

b) *Opacity of the rules and legal insecurity*

While one advantage of bureaucratic control is the predictability of rules (giving the appearance of fairness) (Edwards 1979, 141–42), algorithmic systems introduce *opacity*: allocation rules, quality thresholds, and disciplinary practices are written in code and models that workers cannot monitor or contest. This is a black-box system in which the owners and managers can access the data, but not the workers. Algorithmic codes can change in real-time, which means working conditions can also change quickly. An Uber study shows that *information and power asymmetries* between the company and drivers systematically enable indirect forms of control whereby management is formally ‘neutral’ but in reality, is strongly hierarchical (Rosenblat and Stark 2016, 3760–66).

c) *The individualisation of responsibility and erosion of the collective voice*

According to Edwards, bureaucratic control paradoxically ‘paved the way’ for demands for industrial democracy at work since it promised careers and stability, and tied workers to the company (Edwards 1979, 31–32, 141–42). Algorithmic control, by contrast, often *individualises relations and responsibility* (personalised targets, gamification, individual punishments/deactivations/dismissals) where success or failure is attributed to the individual rather than the system. *The collective articulation of interests and legal representation thus became more difficult* (especially for self-employed platform workers, separated from each other by individual ratings and statistics). Empirical reviews link this to weaker bargaining power and the bigger challenges involved in enforcing rights (Wood et al. 2019, 6).

d) *Emotional labour*

Algorithmic monitoring systems evaluate every worker interaction (such as customer ratings), which adds *psychological pressure* due to the constant visibility and possible sanctions, even indirect ones (like a lower ranking and, in turn, fewer tasks/deliveries). Studies show such metrics can *weaken intrinsic motivation and increase stress* (Lee et al. 2015, 9) and *frustration*.

These consequences lead workers to have: (a) greater dependency on platform rules and evaluation; (b) more difficult access to legal protection due to unclear employment statuses and unclear systems; and (c) a need for new individual and collective strategies (from algorithmic audits to collective data access and union agreements covering metrics, the right to explanations and deactivations).

Individual and collective *resistance tactics*⁶ are thus developing as platform workers seek to translate the invisible algorithmic practices into political demands.

POSSIBLE WAYS TO PROTECT THE INTERESTS OF PLATFORM WORKERS

As previously noted, wherever processes of control and power arise, resistance also emerges. Namely, these activities are tactics which “exploited people use in order to both survive and undermine repressive domination; especially in contexts when rebellion is too risky” (Vinhagen and Johansson in Bonini and Treré 2024, 74). This includes the various tactics and strategies platform workers adopt to protect their own interests, including the following.

Resistance Against Algorithms (Including Algorithms)

In their book *Algorithms of Resistance*, Bonini and Treré (2024) discuss tactics and strategies of everyday resistance used by platform workers (food couriers and drivers) in several countries to counter algorithms. They find that even though platform workers are a very heterogeneous group, their tactics and strategies of algorithmic resistance around the world are similar. The authors divide them into two groups: individual and collective tactics and strategies. Individual tactics are actions by individuals with the goal of improving their personal position. Collective tactics are coordinated actions by larger numbers of platform (gig) workers that require time and cooperation, with the aim to strengthen the position held by the whole group.

Among individual tactics and strategies, they list (2024, 77–85):

- keeping diaries – many food couriers collect data about delivery prices, distance and location, allowing them to track changes and reveal hidden algorithmic parameters, partly regaining control over their work;
- automatic booking of working shifts – couriers might invest in bots (small programmes automating certain actions) on phones to quickly secure shifts; this entails strategic use of entrepreneurial algorithms;
- working for multiple platforms at once – couriers use multiple phones to register on several platforms to expand their income opportunities. Platforms dislike this because it would imply workers’ economic dependence on them, which could alter their employment status;
- multiple accounts on the same platform – a form of unfair competition that improves an individual’s productivity and position while lowering the prospects of others. Platforms attempt to prevent this with countermeasures, usually unsuccessfully; algorithms can be tricked;

⁶ These resistance tactics are referred to as “algoactivism” by Kellogg and co-authors (Kellogg et al. 2020).

- order refusals – so as to raise delivery prices and tips, and reject unprofitable orders, pushing platforms to adjust algorithm parameters;
- choosing routes not suggested by the platform – experienced couriers take faster routes, saving time for even more deliveries;
- Shuadan – in China and India, couriers register as both couriers and customers on two phones and create fake orders when real ones are scarce, which requires the collaboration of certain restaurants;
- delivering outside the platform – especially in India, couriers add to their income by providing additional services to customers (e.g. shopping nearby) for extra payment; and
- order stealing – couriers accept an order, collect the food, but then reject it in the app without confirming the pickup, leading the system to reallocate it. This happens when workers are hungry or angry at the platform and regard it as mild retaliation for being exploited.

Alongside these individual tactics, couriers have also developed

collective practices, which require coordinated actions to achieve common goals. These are forms of cooperation and solidarity that challenge the individualistic logic encoded in the algorithms that govern commercial platforms. (Bonini and Treré 2024, 85)

Collective tactics and strategies include (ibid., 85–99):

- logging out in solidarity – workers who have met their daily goal log out to allow others easier access to orders;
- coordinated order refusal – simultaneous rejection by many workers as organised via online networks and chats; it sometimes substitutes for the absent collective bargaining;
- mutual exchange of working hours – workers coordinate the required hours in particular time periods in private chats;
- sabotage – frequent group log-outs as a protest and to prevent deliveries by non-participants;
- challenging platform access with use of unofficial apps – tech-savvy workers create unauthorised apps to provide functions which are not allowed in corporate apps (e.g., Gojek drivers in Indonesia);
- creating private online groups closed to platforms – spaces for learning, resistance and solidarity, which are widely used and effective. Trade unions sometimes facilitate these to reach the uncovered workers;
- establishing learning environments – mutual help and sharing information about delivery prices and algorithm parameters in an attempt to ‘illuminate the black box’;
- hidden transcripts of resistance – secure chats where workers openly criticise platform policies while on official channels appearing to be positive; and

- mutual aid and solidarity as social capital – chats boost real-world friendships and algorithmic solidarity in cases of robbery, (vehicle and emotional) breakdowns, or other needs.

One may conclude that couriers are:

positioned along a continuum, at the ends of which are two distinct ideal types of moral economy: that of the platforms and that of the couriers. But what do these two moral economies consist of? The first is based on the neoliberal logic of free competition between self-entrepreneurs and the ideology of meritocracy: those who “work hard” deserve to be given more orders than others. The second is based on a cooperative logic, which places mutual aid at the center and justifies illegal actions if they help to improve collective working conditions. This second moral economy also recognises that the meritocratic ideology is a red herring because the algorithm is discriminatory and does not allow everyone to play under the same conditions. (Bonini and Treré 2024, 101)

Establishing Cooperatives Using Platform Infrastructure

Probably the purest and most effective way to protect platform workers' interests is by establishing platform cooperatives in which individuals simultaneously engage in the labour, ownership and management. Platform cooperatives are quite a new phenomenon, merging digital-platform elements with a tradition of cooperative ownership and democratic governance. They are a valuable form of platform-worker collectivism and an alternative to classical digital platforms and the challenges they cause in three key areas: income quality, labour-market security, and quality of the working environment (OECD 2023, 16–17). Essentially, they respond to platforms' influence on working conditions, data management and profit distribution – often to the detriment of workers, providers, or local communities.

Platform cooperatives form a part of a broader movement of platform cooperativism, where it is argued that technology can support a model of democratic management and collective ownership rather than reproducing an extremely centralised investment model with minimal worker influence. Trebor Scholz (2016, 18–21), a leading expert and activist, proposes ten principles for platform cooperativism: 1) collectively owned platform cooperatives; 2) decent pay and income security; 3) budget and data transparency; 4) appreciation and recognition; 5) co-decisions on work; 6) a protective legal framework; 7) portability of worker security and benefits; 8) protection against arbitrary behaviour; 9) the rejection of excessive workplace surveillance; the 10) right to disconnect.

In any event, establishing a platform cooperative also brings several challenges:

- unlike classical digital labour platforms (which have financial advantages, access to cutting-edge technology, established infrastructure and customer networks), platform cooperatives must address these challenges from the outset;
- a lack of funding limits investment in large projects, which is typical of traditional platforms;
- democratic management can cause slower decision-making, a disadvantage in fast-moving digital environments;
- member participation – research shows decision-making and active participation can become considerable challenges, especially as the platform scales up; tensions arise between the platform logic (speed, growth) and the cooperative logic (democracy, inclusion); and
- legal and regulatory obstacles – models often fall into a legal vacuum, or regulations are designed for traditional firms more than digital cooperatives (OECD 2023).

Collective Action – Participation and Collective Bargaining

A major achievement of the twentieth-century labour force was the ability to articulate and protect interests in industrial relations with collective action and trade unions. Only mass union membership enabled greater bargaining power and compelled employers and the state (via institutions) to accept unions as equal partners in negotiations about protecting and improving the economic, social and political position of workers (Hyman 2001, 3–4). While the success of these largely collective negotiations depended on multiple factors across countries⁷, the second half of the twentieth century is seen as a period of relatively favourable labour conditions (standard full-time, open-ended employment with associated social rights and decent working conditions). The late twentieth century saw trends⁸ that lowered union power and made interest protection more difficult. Collective bargaining is losing importance nationally, with employers aware of their bargaining power and sometimes actively obstructing workers' efforts to organise.

These problems have been worsened by the entry of digital labour platforms since they have further flexibilised and fragmented labour markets and individualised workers. A large proportion of platform workers rely on their own efforts to protect their interests (European Commission 2022, 13).

Conversely, positive experiences of collective action by platform-worker groups create opportunities for new grassroots unions to emerge locally, along with other forms of representation (like associations). Existing unions can also contribute by becoming more inclusive – allowing platform workers to join and protect their interests within them.

⁷ Unfortunately, there is no space here to include and provide a more detailed analysis of the Varieties of Capitalism theory.

⁸ Neoliberalism, globalism, individualism, flexibilisation, de-unionisation, de-industrialisation.

It is important to be aware that the success of interest-protection strategies also depends on the institutional power of the social partners and the tradition of industrial relations. The Scandinavian countries are a good example, successfully combining direct and indirect participation on the company level with strong and coordinated collective bargaining on higher levels.

Adapting Legislation by States and Broader Political and Economic Organisations (EU)

Finally, the role played by states and broader political and economic organisations (notably the EU) in regulating European labour markets and the position of platform workers should be mentioned.

Labour market regulation mostly remains up to individual EU member states to determine. Legislation thus varies from state to state according to different concepts, ideologies and the institutional (bargaining, lobbying) power of actors. States, therefore, respond differently to changing labour-market conditions – some regulators are relatively passive or slow, whereas others respond quickly⁹, in turn creating a demanding legal environment for EU-level policy.

This is especially apparent when it comes to digital labour platforms. Their entry, organisation and management, together with algorithmic control, have muddied the employment status, legal rights and conditions of some platform-worker groups. Subject to the configuration of service provision and national legislation, platform workers might be treated as self-employed, employees, agency workers, or on-call workers.

Workers often bear market and organisational risks, while platforms exercise direct control through algorithmic task allocation, ratings, and dynamic pricing. The traditional divide between ‘employee’ and ‘self-employed’ is too simplistic in such environments, producing grey areas in social security, work time, health and safety, and access to legal protection (ILO 2021, 5–8).

As concerns platform workers, the EU responded relatively quickly by adopting Directive (EU) 2024/2831 on improving working conditions in platform work. Among others, it introduces: a) the presumption of an employment relationship when a platform exercises typical employer control; b) a set of rights relating to algorithmic management (transparency, human oversight, protection against discrimination and retaliation), complemented with horizontal instruments like the GDPR (right to human oversight and limits on solely automated decision-making) and the AI Act, which subjects high-risk employment systems to stricter requirements; and c) obligations in cross-border situations (document

⁹ A particularly interesting case is from the United Kingdom where two Uber drivers (Aslam and Farar) ultimately succeeded in having the Supreme Court rule in 2021 that Uber drivers enjoy employee status according to most criteria (The Supreme Court of the United Kingdom 2021). Slovenia also responded relatively quickly by including two articles (213–4) in its Employment Relations Act, which define the status of an economically dependent person, indirectly supporting the status of some platform workers in Slovenia.

accessibility, cooperation between authorities). The directive follows two logics: to relieve individual workers of the burden of proof while preserving flexible arrangements where actual elements do not indicate dependent work (EU 2024, Arts. 3–10). Since algorithmic management (task allocation, account suspension, performance rating) is a key tool for platforms, the directive introduces rights to information about the criteria, weights and logic of decisions; requires human oversight and a right to appeal to an independent body or person within the platform; and prohibits the processing of certain data categories not necessary for carrying out work (EU 2024, Arts. 6–9). These norms bridge labour law and data protection.

The core interests of platform workers should accordingly be protected: (a) a correct classification (employment relationship or appropriate rights for economically dependent workers); (b) a predictable income (minimum tariffs, warnings about dynamic pricing); (c) procedural rights concerning algorithmic management (explanations, appeals, human oversight); (d) social security (contributions, insurance, benefits); and (e) representation and collective bargaining. The new EU rules affect all of these areas.

CONCLUSION

The analysis has shown that digital labour platforms and algorithmic control are not merely technological innovations, and instead are important factors in the rise of a new configuration of power in labour relations. The precarisation, fragmentation and individualisation of workers are structural effects of the digital platform economy that deepen the power asymmetries between capital and labour. The digital platform economy also represents an intensified and less visible continuation of control with the introduction of algorithmic management, which continuously directs, evaluates and disciplines workers, often without transparent rules. An important feature of this kind of control is its high flexibility and adaptability – not only to the national and regional specifics, but also to the specific features of a given digital platform. In turn, this makes the reaction of regulatory agencies and workers even more difficult.

Overall, these relations also establish new spaces for resistance and collective autonomy – from the micro-tactics of everyday individual and collective resistance to forms of platform cooperativism and EU institutional responses. Even though the emergence of such tactics (as presented in this article) demonstrates that platform workers are not passive victims, these actions still function more as micro-strategies for survival rather than structural and systemic shifts in power.

Further, all of the worker strategies described in this article should also be assessed critically. Individual tactics of resistance can reveal the weaknesses of platform power and help workers survive, yet might also reproduce competition between workers and leave the workers' structural position unchanged. While collective workers' action via different associations, traditional trade unions and/or new grassroots forms of organising remains indispensable, these different

types of organisations must adapt to a more fragmented, spatially and temporally dispersed, and variously legally protected workforce, which also holds varying aspirations. Adoption of the EU Platform Work Directive is an important step, but will not be enough if the implementation is focused solely on formal compliance, disregarding enforceable rights to an explanation, a human review, collective access to data, algorithmic auditing, and other relevant issues.

We may hence conclude that no single protective tactic/strategy presented in this article is sufficient to protect workers' interests on digital labour platforms. Protecting platform workers' interests calls for the integration of three dimensions: political (collective action), technological (algorithmic transparency) and legal (normative frameworks for decent work). Ultimately, it is a social and political question – whether digital labour platforms (like other digital innovations) will continue to externalise the risks and place them on workers, or whether they will be subordinated to collective norms of decent work, industrial democracy, and social justice.

DATA AVAILABILITY

No new research data were generated.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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MOŽNI NAČINI ZAŠČITE INTERESOV PLATFORMNIH DELAVCEV

Povzetek. Članek preučuje preobrazbo odnosov moči v platformni ekonomiji in načine zaščite interesov platformnih delavcev v pogojih algoritmičnega nadzora. S pomočjo kritične analize konceptov prekarizacije in nadzora (Kalleberg et al., Edwards, Foucault) je prikazano, da digitalne platforme dela ustvarjajo nove oblike odvisnosti in negotovosti, pa tudi nove priložnosti za odpor. Opredeljene so štiri ravni zaščite interesov platformnih delavcev: individualne in kolektivne taktike upora, vzpostavljanje platformnih kooperativ, organizirano kolektivno zastopanje ter zakonodajni ukrepi držav in EU. V zaključku je poudarjena potreba po usklajenem delovanju kolektivne, tehnološke in pravne sfere za zagotavljanje dostojnega dela v digitalni dobi.

Ključni pojmi: digitalne platforme dela, platformno delo, prekarizacija, nadzor, algoritmi, kolektivna pogajanja.