Digital Labour Platforms and the changing World of Work

"Many jobs are being reshaped at the task level by AI rather than disappearing wholesale, and nowhere is that reshaping more literal than in the gig economy, where the algorithm is the manager, the dispatcher, and the payroll department."

The Next Web News 26 April 2026

https://thenextweb.com/news/china-gig-worker-platform-labour-rules

Digitalization is changing work globally and creating new challenges.

- The platform economy is one of the most significant manifestations of the changes induced by the digitalization of the world of work.
- The platform economy is now a space where urban unemployed youth are often more easily able to enter the labour market.
- The growth of this economy has opened up new markets for businesses and created new jobs and income opportunities, often with high flexibility and low barriers of access for workers.
- The platform economy is also significantly transforming the ways work is organized and performed – however with new challenges emerging in ensuring that workers on platforms have access to decent work.

Digital Platform Workers

- The Platform Economy has grown and spread to industries such as transport (*e-hailing & courier services*), domestic & care work, education, data & content moderators.
- While the platform economy is indeed developing rapidly, having some positive impacts, transforming existing sectors and creating new ones, it has also created real and persistent decent work deficits.
- ILO (*International Labour Organisation*) is the only international multilateral organisation which specifically protects and defends the right of workers, including those in the informal economy and changing world of work, and the increasing numbers of economically dependent workers outside of traditional employment relationships.
- BUT there is an internal structural contradiction – the very (tripartite) structure of the ILO militates against protecting and defending the EQUAL rights of workers who are not in an employment relationship, such as own-account workers, defined as follows in the ILO's 2002 Resolution on Decent Work & the Informal economy: "*Workers in the informal economy include both wage workers and own account workers. Most own account workers are as insecure and vulnerable as wage workers and move from one situation to the other. Because they lack protection, rights and representation, these workers often remain trapped in poverty*."

WORKING CONDITIONS of Platform Workers – ILO general survey 2020

- Lack of guaranteed income and access to a living wage
- Employment status misclassification – lack of recognition as workers
- Insufficient rights to freedom of association & collective bargaining
- Unpaid working time – time spent waiting for a task online is not considered for payment
- No protection against violence and harassment at work
- No protective equipment provided
- Lack of access to sanitation and rest facilities
- No access to dispute settlement and grievance mechanisms
- Workers monitored by Algorithm System
- The lack of transparency of Algorithms has created a power imbalance between workers and platforms

Platform Workers got organised

- Throughout the world, especially in the Global South, digital platform workers have been organising collectively into associations and MBOs (*membership-based organisations*)
- The lack of official recognition of digital platform workers **as workers** has prevented many of these worker organisations from being able to register as unions in many countries, especially in the Global North
- Nevertheless, digital platform workers have succeeded in forming unions in many countries such as Brazil, Cambodia, Chile, Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, France, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Panama, Peru, Senegal, etc. – and many of them are affiliated to national trade union centres in their countries leading the way from Global South
- Many of these digital platform workers' organisations are further affiliated to international worker organisations and networks, such as:

  - ITF (*International Transportworkers Federation*)
  - IAATW (*International Alliance of App-based Transport Workers*)
  - GPWSP (*Global Platform Workers' Solidarity Project*)

In March 2023 the ILO Governing Body placed a discussion on the agenda of the International Labour Conference sessions in June of 2025 and 2026 for an international instrument on Decent Work in the Platform Economy.

The international networks of digital platform workers reacted and organised by raising funds for the convening of a Gig Workers' Summit, "in the shadow of the International Labor Conference's first-ever discussion on binding global standards for platform work, and in the face of digital capitalism's deepening violence" in Geneva in June 2025 at the same time as the 2025 session of the International Labour Conference (ILC) where the Committee on Decent Work in the Platform Economy sat for the first time.

During the ILC, members of the Workers' Group from the Committee on Decent Work in the Platform Economy went across to meet the organised digital platform workers congregated at the Gig Workers' Summit, to build solidarity and share progress reports as to how the discussions were going.

Inside the ILC Committee, the Employers' Group was strenuously resisting the Convention on Decent Work in the Platform Economy, trying to lobby for a (less binding) ILO Recommendation instead. The EU government bloc was strenuously resisting the inclusion of own-account (self-employed) platform workers n the coverage of the Convention. Fortunately they lost both these fights!

Meantime, the Gig Workers' Summit of 2025 affirmed

- That platform capitalism is not a technical innovation but a political project — one that manufactures new zones of exploitation, dispossession, and invisibility for all workers;
- That the promised "flexibility" of platform work provides cover for deep precarity; that algorithmic control, subcontracting, and legal evasion are not exceptions but systemic features;
- That racialized, caste & class-oppressed, migrant, disabled, and gendered bodies bear the brunt of this system — not by accident, but by design. Platform work should act to prevent and eliminate discrimination in all its forms through respect for the rights of ALL workers and exercise of their right to freedom of association;
- That their struggles are interconnected — and that global justice cannot be expected from above by techno-solutionist or neoliberal institutions, but built from below through transnational solidarity;
- That climate change is an existential risk to humanity and our planet, and that workers employed in platform value- and supply-chains are particularly vulnerable to its harms. Employers and states must ensure workplaces that confront, address and mitigate the impacts of climate change on platform-based workers;
- That platformization is not a process happening in isolation, but rather a growing expropriative global phenomenon capturing value and supply chains across the world including transportation, care work, domestic work, healthcare, hospitality, logistics and warehousing, garment manufacturing, retail, agriculture, automobile manufacturing, customer support, content moderation and software engineering, with devastating consequences for workers from all sectors;
- That they commit to the goal of a binding set of legal standards to hold platform corporations accountable, at the level of national, regional, and international law including through an ILO convention, improvements on, and enforcement of, the EU platform directive, and other binding and enforceable instruments.

- *Extract from 2025 report prepared by Anne Dufresne, sociologist.*

Intensifying digital platform worker solidarity between 2025 and 2026

- The solidarity links between international trade union federations and independent networks of organised digital platform workers were actively sustained and strengthened during the year between June 2025 and June 2026;
- The networks that had convened the Gig Workers' Summit re-grouped and formed the GPWSP (*Global Platform Workers' Solidarity Project*) and organised a second international event, this time just before the ILC meeting in June 2026, in Nairobi in May 2026, to which they also invited trade unionists from Africa
- All joined hands in the preparations for the 2026 ILC discussions where the ILO Convention and the supporting Recommendation would be finalised and adopted.
- In South Africa, relationships were strengthened between the trade union federations (FEDUSA, COSATU) and NEFSA (*National e-hailing Federation of South Africa*) which is in turn affiliated to IAATW.

ILC 2026 preparations in South Africa

- DoT gazetted new e-hailing and platform transport regulations under the framework of the National Land Transport Act in September 2025. However, these regulations made no mention of any decent work provisions – claiming that this is the responsibility of DEL
- But apparently DoT and DEL apparently did NO joint preparation for the ILC discussion on Decent Work and the Platform Economy
- WIEGO and SCIS (*Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at Wits*) organised a public dialogue in April 2026 with GS of NEFSA as guest speaker, and respondents from DoT, DEL and DST who met each other for the first time on this matter.
- NEDLAC (led by DEL) just did their normal report about what items would be on the agenda of the ILC 2026, without entertaining any reports about the extensive preparations of digital platform workers for the Decent Work in the Platform Economy discussion.

2026 (second) ILC discussion on Decent Work in the Platform Economy

To cut a long and vicious story short ….. the 2026 ILC discussions were characterised by endless filibustering and bad faith negotiations on the part of the Employers' Group. All that stopped an outcome of failure to complete the negotiations and thereby blocking the Convention was the determination of the vast majority of governments not to remain with this work sector unregulated going forward – having become tired of the owners of digital labour platforms registered outside of their countries remaining unaccountable while having power to manage a work sector in their countries – something which has been extensively litigated against in many countries. The only governments who consistently supported the Employers Group were the USA, Israel, Argentina, Chile, New Zealand – a small group nicknamed by one of our comrades in the Workers' Group as "the Coalition of the Horribles" ☺

The Convention text was finalised at the 11th hour on the final day, but there was no time to discuss the text of the supporting Recommendation. This was referred to the ILO Governing body to reschedule on the agenda of a future session of the ILC.

Article 1 (b) of the draft Convention text defines a digital platform worker as a person employed or engaged to work

(i) for the provision of service organised and/or facilitated by a digital labour platform;

(ii) for remuneration or payment;

(iii) **regardless of their classification of status in employment.**

The resulting Convention C193 requires Member States (upon ratification) to take measures ensuring, *inter alia*:

- Respect for fundamental principles and rights at work in the platform economy.
- OSH protection and the right to remove oneself from imminent danger.
- Protection against violence and harassment (*including online/third-party*)
- Correct classification based on facts of the work relationship.
- Timely, full, transparent remuneration (*with consideration of minimum wage and expense compensation, especially for those in employment relationships*).
- Social security access no less favourable than for comparable workers of the same status.
- Information and responsible use of automated/algorithmic systems affecting work allocation, evaluation, or conditions.
- Prevention of abuse of migrants and refugees.
- Promotion of decent work opportunities, skills development, and formalization (*including registration of self-employed platform workers*)

BUT, as this is a negotiated agreement, there are still escape clauses for governments and the employers controlling digital platforms!!

- Article 2 para 2 says “where special problems of a substantial nature arise, Member States may …….. exclude from the application of all or part of the Convention

(a) limited categories of digital labour platforms; or

(b) limited categories of digital platform workers”

- Article 10 para 3 says “Each Member shall **give consideration as to whether** the (*remuneration*) measures adopted notably under paragraph 2(a) of this Article shall be provided **to digital platform workers who are not in an employment relationship**.”

- Article 12 says “Each Member shall take measures to ensure that digital platform workers enjoy social security protection on terms no less favourable that those applicable to **other workers with the same classification of status in employment**.” This is repeated in Article 23.

What does this mean?

- While own-account (self-employed) digital platform workers are **not excluded** by the Platform Workers Convention (*as has happened with some previous ILO instruments such as C177 on Home Work*) instead they are **relegated to a second-class status** in comparison to those workers who have an employment relationship (*i.e. employees*)
- In a report issued by IAATW exposing ways that transport and delivery platform enterprises are evolving to evade new ILO standards, in particular the SaaS (*Software as a Service*) model, sometimes referred to as the subscription model or a leasing model, the escape clauses are likely to be widely used by the employers controlling the digital platforms to evade their responsibilities to provide decent work conditions for the digital platform workers whose work they exploit.
- These effects are likely to impact disproportionately on digital platform workers in the Global South, where a larger proportion of work is in the informal economy and more workers are outside of employment relationships.
- This also means that the elusive right to **direct participation** in collective bargaining for workers who are not in an employment relationship, despite "the effective right to collective bargaining" for digital platform workers as proclaimed in Article 3(a) will probably remain out of reach for digital platform workers, along with other workers in the informal economy, in all countries where there is no strenuous struggle on the ground explicitly for that.

Some thoughts about the future of work and worker control in the digital labour market

- It is clear that behind every digital platform and algorithm are humans who design how they work. Most of them are serving the interests of capitalism, and we are already familiar with many of the capitalist multinationals in this sector, e.g. Uber, Amazon, etc.
- So we need to thoroughly research alternative locally-developed models dominating in certain countries of the Global South (*such as Agence Togo Digital and e-Taxi in Namibia*) as well as applying revolutionary efforts to the development of digital platform workers' cooperatives
- Labour inspectors must become more than inspectors of physical workplaces, and be upskilled to understand the digital workplace
- We need to investigate ways of pushing boundaries to develop an "African digital economy as an instrument of shared prosperity rather than a mechanism of concentrated wealth, a platform for youth empowerment rather than exploitation, a catalyst for inclusive development rather that a new architecture of inequality".*

*Adapted from speech by National Ex-officio Chairman, Media, Publicity & Technical Committee, AUATON (*Automotive Service Nonprofit Organisation, Travel & Transportation*) Nigeria