

# Stripping back the mask: Working conditions on digital labour platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic

Kelle HOWSON,\* Funda USTEK-SPILDA,\* Alessio BERTOLINI,\*  
Richard HEEKS,\*\* Fabian FERRARI,\* Srujana KATTA,\*  
Matthew COLE,\* Pablo AGUERA RENESES,\* Nancy SALEM,\*  
David SUTCLIFFE,\* Shelly STEWARD\* and Mark GRAHAM\*

---

**Abstract.** *Digital labour platforms have been widely promoted as a solution to the unemployment crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic has also highlighted the vulnerability of gig workers when cast as essential workers. This article examines the COVID-19 policies of 191 platforms in 43 countries to understand how the crisis has shifted the conventions of the gig economy. Using a typology of “fair platform work”, the authors identify areas of progress in worker protection but also significant shortfalls, including the entrenchment of precarious work as platforms leverage the opportunities arising from the crisis.*

**Keywords:** *gig economy, COVID-19, future of work, digital labour platforms, labour rights, precarious employment, working conditions.*

---

## 1. Introduction

Millions of workers around the world are increasingly subsumed into and reliant on the platform (or “gig”) economy, performing piece-rate or one-off tasks for clients via apps or digital labour platforms. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic,

---

\* Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, emails: kelle.howson@oii.ox.ac.uk (corresponding author), funda.ustek@oii.ox.ac.uk, alessio.bertolini@oii.ox.ac.uk, fabian.ferrari@oii.ox.ac.uk, srujana.katta@oii.ox.ac.uk, matthew.cole@oii.ox.ac.uk, pablo.aguerarenese@oii.ox.ac.uk, nancy.salem@oii.ox.ac.uk, david.sutcliffe@oii.ox.ac.uk, shelly.steward@oii.ox.ac.uk and mark.graham@oii.ox.ac.uk.

\*\* Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, email: richard.heeks@manchester.ac.uk. This work was supported by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), under a commission by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit; the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the Global Challenges Research Fund (ES/S00081X/1); the Higher Education Innovation Fund and ESRC Impact Acceleration Account through the University of Oxford’s COVID-19: Economic, Social, Cultural, & Environmental Impacts – Urgent Response Fund; and the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation funding programme (grant agreement No. 838081).

Responsibility for opinions expressed in signed articles rests solely with their authors, and publication does not constitute an endorsement by the ILO.

This article is also available in French, in *Revue internationale du Travail* 161 (3), and Spanish, in *Revista Internacional del Trabajo* 141 (3).

researchers were increasingly sounding the alarm about the unsafe and precarious conditions faced by platform workers globally, fearing a race to the bottom in labour standards within a regulatory vacuum (Berg et al. 2018; Forde et al. 2017; Graham and Anwar 2019). Many pointed to the rapid platformization of diverse types of work and the fact that this process was drawing more and more workers outside the purview of long-fought-for and slow-to-adapt labour protections (Stanford 2017). Issues such as the classification of platform workers as independent contractors or self-employed workers (and their consequential exclusion from key rights and benefits) were already highly contentious among platform economy stakeholders. However, few imagined that the full material consequences of these debates would manifest themselves so suddenly and so devastatingly, as platform workers found themselves largely unable to fall back on social safety nets amid national lockdowns and economic contraction. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, some fit and able workers could have overlooked the fact that platform work would not provide them with a safety net, but the events of 2020 laid bare the extent to which the digital labour platform model has succeeded in transferring risks on to workers, and the real-life consequences of this shift. These events also made it undeniably clear that labour performed via digital platforms – such as shopping, delivery, transport and care work – is essential to maintaining not only our economies, but also the health of our communities, especially in times of public health crisis.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been an urgent need for data and insights into how many workers rely on digital labour platforms for their livelihoods, how these workers have been affected by COVID-19 in terms of their working conditions, incomes and well-being, and how platforms and policymakers have responded to protect them from adverse outcomes. Moreover, it is crucial to trace the macro-level impacts of the pandemic on the platform economy. Has COVID-19 allowed platform companies to further insinuate themselves into the essential functioning of our social and economic infrastructure? Has the pandemic boosted the demand for and supply of platform labour? Has it further eroded key labour movement gains? Conversely, the question of whether the platform economy can present solutions to the manifold crises we face took on greater urgency as mass unemployment loomed as a result of the business impact of extended lockdowns. Can it help to address issues of unemployment, and dovetail advantageously with the flexible work revolution that the pandemic has triggered?

The rapid rise and spread of platforms, in line with the model of Uber, has relied crucially on their ability to deny responsibility and evade accountability for the conditions and risks experienced by their workers (Woodcock and Graham 2020). However, in the year leading up to the time of writing, in early 2021, platforms had come under increased public and political pressure to change their policies in order to protect workers from the immediate risks posed by the pandemic, and from the structural vulnerability that those platforms had identified, exploited and perpetuated until then. But by taking steps to protect workers – for example, by providing personal protective equipment (PPE), sick pay and compensation for loss of income – such platforms risk undermining the tenuous legal and rhetorical ground on which they have based their business models.

Researchers at the Fairwork Project<sup>1</sup> track the working conditions on location-based digital labour platforms<sup>2</sup> against benchmarks of fairness. These benchmarks have been developed in collaboration with workers and other stakeholders since 2018. We were able to adapt this methodology following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as leveraging our established research networks in order to address some of the questions raised above. Starting in April 2020, we developed and maintained a database of platforms' responses to the pandemic, focusing on the extent to which they provided or enacted fair and safe working conditions in the context of the pandemic. These data were collected by project researchers through both documentary analysis and direct engagement with platforms and platform workers. We reviewed published platform policies, news and analytical reports, responses from trade unions and other worker groups, and information provided by platforms on their websites and through their public outreach. We also contacted and invited all the platforms included in our database to provide information about their policies and operations. Drawing on a review of the policies of 191 platforms in 43 countries, we consider whether platforms' responses to COVID-19 have created better conditions and reduced precariousness for their workers. With reference to the project's benchmarks for fair platform work, we created a typology of policy responses under the categories of fair pay, fair conditions and fair management, in order to help us understand and reflect on the extent to which the pandemic has challenged or shifted the conventions that underpin the platform economy.<sup>3</sup>

Encouragingly, our findings suggest that some positive steps were taken towards protecting platform workers during this period. However, we also identify some significant shortfalls in protection and the possibility of the entrenchment of precarious platform work as a result of the pandemic, examples of crisis opportunism having become apparent. Lastly, we examine political developments deriving in various ways from the pandemic, including instances of consolidated labour resistance, but also of platforms successfully lobbying for legislative change in their own favour.

Going forward, the unexpected shock of the pandemic represents a tipping point for labour conditions in the platform economy, and the outcome of this crisis could be one of two extremes. In one scenario, platform companies might utilize the moment of uncertainty to further entrench an exploitative model and expand it into new sectors. We are certainly already seeing evidence of this in many places. In a second scenario, we argue that, in order for COVID-19 to serve as a catalyst for a fairer future of platform work, regulators must respond to the calls of platform workers, and seize the moment to permanently close

<sup>1</sup> See [www.fair.work](http://www.fair.work).

<sup>2</sup> That is, platforms that mediate geographically tethered service work, such as food delivery, cleaning services and ride-hailing, which take place in a particular physical location. In this article we do not consider platform work that can be done from anywhere (for example, the home), such as transcription, image annotation and virtual assistance.

<sup>3</sup> Partly because of the scarcity of publicly available data on platform worker numbers and distribution, our review does not distinguish or weight platforms according to the number of workers enrolled on them. Every platform regardless of its size is counted as one, though when identifying the sample we focused on the most prominent platforms in each country included in this study.

the loopholes that platforms have used to disenfranchise workers from decent working conditions. As governments are moving with increased public licence to both protect current livelihoods and enable the creation of new ones, this is a crucial moment to regulate digital labour platforms for a fairer future of work.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The second section explores the effects of the first year of the pandemic on labour markets and the consequences for digital platform labour. The third section considers the difficulties faced by platform workers in accessing government support owing to their employment status. The fourth section evaluates platform responses to address the risks facing their workers against the Fairwork benchmarks of fairness. The fifth section presents evidence of a rise in collective action among platform workers, contrasted, in the sixth section, with the efforts by platforms to deny their responsibilities. The last section summarizes our findings and proposes avenues for timely action to protect platform workers' rights.

## 2. COVID-19 and the digitalization of labour

This article reports on trends observed in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, the social and economic impacts of the pandemic were expected to be severe, but the picture was still emerging. As of January 2021, more than 90 million people had been infected with COVID-19 and over 2 million of them had died – figures that have since risen exponentially. In its April 2020 *World Economic Outlook* report, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected global growth in 2020 to fall to –3 per cent, with growth in advanced economies projected to be at –6.1 per cent (IMF 2020). The cumulative loss to global gross domestic product (GDP) over 2020 and 2021 was predicted to be around 9 trillion dollars (Gopinath 2020), representing the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression and the first time since the 1930s that high-, middle- and low-income countries had simultaneously been in recession. Based on an analysis of the declines in output (50–100 per cent) from the sectors most immediately impacted by widespread shutdowns, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) predicted an initial hit to the GDP of the Group of Seven economies<sup>4</sup> of between 20 and 25 per cent (OECD 2020).

Although the global economy began to recover in 2021, recovery has been slowed by rising inflation and the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. The effects of these crises on financial markets, economic activity and social life continue to accumulate as the pandemic enters its third year. This article provides a snapshot of the early ramifications of the pandemic for platform workers, focusing on the impact of initial pandemic responses, in particular lockdowns and designations of certain types of work as “essential”. However, we acknowledge that some of the risks and pressures present early on in the pandemic have subsided as lockdowns have become less common. In contrast, other risks have been heightened by more recent developments, namely the rise in inflation, which has disproportionately impacted low-income earners, precarious workers, and low- and middle-income countries.

---

<sup>4</sup> Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

In terms of the labour market, at the end of May 2020 the ILO (2020) reported that 94 per cent of the world's workers were living in countries that imposed some form of workplace closure in an attempt to control the spread of the virus. Some 20 per cent of the world's workers lived in countries that required closures of services involving all but "essential workers" (though the definition of "essential" varied from country to country), and nearly 70 per cent of workers lived in countries that required workplace closures for certain sectors or categories of workers. The ILO also estimated a decline in working hours of more than 10 per cent in the second quarter of 2020 relative to the last quarter of 2019, equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs worldwide (assuming a 48-hour working week). According to these figures, the Americas, and Europe and Central Asia were estimated to have sustained the largest losses in hours worked globally (13.1 and 12.9 per cent, respectively) (ILO 2020).

What is more, the crisis did not affect all workers to the same degree or in the same way. While for some groups of workers, working from home became a reality that enabled them to save on costs such as transportation or eating out at work, others faced severe consequences in the form of redundancy, unpaid leave or ever more precarious work arrangements. Near-complete shutdown threatened some sectors, such as the hospitality, tourism, retail and entertainment industries, generating widespread loss of livelihood. Young workers experienced some of the worst effects. In May 2020, the ILO (2020) indicated that over 15 per cent of young people had stopped working since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, while those who remained in employment experienced an average reduction in working hours of 23 per cent. Globally, as of April 2020, 16.1 per cent of young women and 18.1 per cent of young men (aged 18–29) had stopped working. Young men reported a reduction in income more frequently than young women (46 per cent versus 38 per cent, respectively) (ILO 2020).

In parallel, social distancing and periodic lockdown measures required society to adapt to a new normal in which direct human contact was minimized or completely eliminated, leading to an acceleration in the digitalization of the economy (Baig et al. 2020). This included a rapid increase in the use of digital collaboration platforms, e-commerce, worker surveillance tools, "cloudwork" and gig work (Sneader and Singhal 2020), disrupting conventional management and organizational practices, which traditionally rely on physical proximity and observation (Malev 2020).

Platform workers have maintained essential public services during the pandemic, including delivering food and household essentials to those self-isolating or practising social distancing, and providing care services to those in need. Ordering food or groceries via platforms, cashless payments, contactless delivery and using a ride-hailing platform for travel rather than public transport have all become normalized, even in countries where this was not previously the case. A pre-pandemic OECD report estimated that platform workers accounted for between 0.3 per cent (in developing countries) and 0.5 per cent (elsewhere) of workers worldwide, reaching as much as 3 per cent of the working-age population in some countries (Schwellnus et al. 2019). It remains very difficult to estimate overall numbers of platform workers, since platforms do not disclose them, but this rate is likely to have increased further as a result of the

pandemic. Recurring lockdowns and the financial downturn have undoubtedly caused many workers around the world to lose secure employment and seek alternatives in platform work.

### 3. Falling through the cracks: Platform workers' access to social protections

It is not clear whether a greater supply of platform workers as a result of the pandemic has been matched by an increase in demand for their labour, and this will have certainly varied from one sector to another. Indeed, we see a marked polarization in the platform economy between essential workers who may have seen their workload increase, such as last-mile and food delivery couriers, and other areas, such as personal grooming and domestic services, which in 2020 saw a dramatic and sometimes legislated drop-off in business. Within the former group, earnings may have been maintained but this will have been at the cost of continued exposure to health risks. In the United Kingdom, for example, 28 per cent of platform workers surveyed reported having more work than usual in August 2020. Of these, 78 per cent felt that their health was at greater risk while working but continued to work anyway owing to serious concerns about losing their income (Blundell, Machin and Ventura 2020).

In those sectors of the platform economy that experienced a substantial decline in demand, we see an equally dramatic drop in earnings: one global survey undertaken during the strictest lockdowns in March 2020 found that 70 per cent of platform workers had no income and 90 per cent were seeking new sources of income (Moulds 2020). One of the sources of economic support such platform workers turned to was the government. This was to be expected, given that governments have launched an unprecedented response to COVID-19: by May 2020, 190 countries had announced a total of nearly 1,000 social protection programmes for their citizens, including many income top-up, support or replacement schemes for workers (Gentilini et al. 2020).

However, at least in the early stages of the pandemic, platform workers came up against a long-standing problem when attempting to access these programmes. Based on tests of employee status established in the ILO Employment Relationship Recommendation, 2006 (No. 198), or on legislation derived from those tests, platform workers in many contexts can be regarded as platform employees (see Bogg 2019; Heeks et al. 2020). For example, many platform workers are wholly dependent on platforms and have little control over how their work is organized, or the price they can demand for it – both of which are indicators of employee status. However, the contractual status of many platform workers has not been that of a platform “employee”, but rather of an “independent contractor”.<sup>5</sup> This

<sup>5</sup> Whether gig workers are in an employment relationship, and therefore whether they have been contractually misclassified by platforms is a source of substantial juridical contention and legislative debate across the world. The answer to this question is no doubt complex, and is contingent on the specificities of sectors, jurisdictions, subcontracting arrangements and other contextual factors. We do not intend to settle this question here, but rather to draw attention to the tenuous and contradictory logic that platforms are currently advancing, and the attendant opportunities for pro-worker activists and regulators to intervene.



intermediate, neither-fish-nor-fowl contractual status has caused workers in many countries to fall through the cracks of government welfare provisions introduced to help workers during the crisis (see Mawii, Rathi and Tandon 2020). In the United Kingdom, the Government's Self-Employment Income Support Scheme did not include workers who were employed after April 2019 and could not present the necessary tax records, or who earned less than half their income from self-employment (Belger 2020). As Lord et al. (2020) note, many platform workers were ineligible for this scheme because the majority were unlikely to have worked for more than two years. In France, platform workers are not officially considered to be employees and would thus have been eligible for only a one-time payment of €1,500, specifically designated for "micro-entrepreneurs" (Apouey et al. 2020). South Africa provides another example of the importance of the classification of platform workers when accessing support in the context of the pandemic. Had platform workers truly been independent contractors, they would have been formally registered as a business – and could then have applied for soft loans from the Government's COVID-19 Debt Relief Fund or to have existing loans underwritten. Alternatively, had platform workers been recognized as employees and had their platforms been paying into the country's Unemployment Insurance Fund, then the platform concerned could have made use of the COVID-19 Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme that provided replacement income for workers laid off as a result of the pandemic. Since neither condition applied, platform workers had no access to government assistance. As a result of such difficulties, surveys across a number of countries showed that lack of income was platform workers' main concern during the first half of 2020 (Flourish 2020a and 2020b; Fairwork 2020a).

As the pandemic raged through 2020, some governments did extend social protection provisions to platform workers and announced loan/debt repayment moratoriums.<sup>6</sup> However, despite the introduction of new provisions, significant barriers to accessing government support remained. Platform workers said that the moratoriums were valuable in reducing outgoings, such as repayments on loans for cars or motorcycles used for ride-hailing or delivery work (Flourish 2020b). There were, however, reports of creditors reducing payments rather than stopping them altogether, as intended by the moratorium, and of creditors simply ignoring the new rules (Prawira Adjie 2020; Mawii 2020; Ustek-Spilda, Heeks and Graham 2020). Workers also reported difficulties accessing social assistance payment schemes because of slow government implementation, because they lacked the required documentation, or because schemes extended only to national citizens and formally registered migrants (Fairwork 2020a; Pacis 2020). Workers included in the US Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act,<sup>7</sup> for example, experienced significant delays in receiving assistance (Romo 2020). Some workers in India were able to receive government food or financial aid but many others came up against access barriers to aid (Flourish 2020b). Because

<sup>6</sup> See International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Policy Responses to COVID-19", Policy Tracker. <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19/>.

<sup>7</sup> United States Congress, Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, Public Law 116–136, 27 March 2020, 134 STAT. 281.

platform work (by design) tends to take place within regulatory blind spots, even where policymakers have tried their best to include these workers in social protections, it has sometimes proved extremely difficult to set the parameters of who qualifies for assistance, and to reach those workers through appropriate provisions. The result has been piecemeal assistance, which has fallen far short of the comprehensive protections available to workers in other sectors who are classified as employees.

These challenges have sometimes left workers struggling to meet basic needs, as reflected in interviews we conducted with platform workers in South Africa:

We don't have any food. My children they don't have food. We are still waiting on food parcels from Government – not sure if we going to get it. (Platform worker in Cape Town, April 2020)

The Government must help us with food as well, but I am a foreigner here in South Africa so I don't think Government can help us with food. (Platform worker in Cape Town, April 2020)

Thus, the early pandemic created two categories of platform workers – non-essential workers who were unable to continue working and had little to no access to income protection, and essential workers, who had similar barriers to protection but who had the unenviable option of continuing to risk their health by going to work. Platforms have actively created the conditions for this to occur by building their business models on a precarious class of workers – that is, workers who are nominally independent, but who in reality have limited agency. The experience of platform workers in the pandemic has revealed the true extent to which platforms exert employer-like control over workers' conditions, safety and well-being. But putting aside employment status – which is nebulous, contentious and contingent on jurisdiction – platforms' value creation and extraction are predicated on the labour and the risk undertaken by their workers, instituting a relationship of dependence with those workers. We therefore argue that platforms have a fundamental civic responsibility to observe workers' basic rights to occupational safety and health, and to protect workers from the risks associated with their work – risks which have significantly increased as a result of COVID-19. This responsibility becomes all the more pressing where platform workers are unable to access the rights and protections afforded to employees by state regulations.

## **4. Platform responses to address the risks facing workers during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Given the increased insecurity and precariousness of platform work, this article explores what platforms have done to mitigate the risks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and to improve working conditions. A typology of policy responses was created in order to capture all the types of policies that have been introduced in the face of COVID-19, and to allow us to examine the extent to which the virus has shifted the conventions that underpin the platform economy. Our analysis is structured around the Fairwork principles of fair pay,



fair conditions and fair management (Graham et al. 2020) (see Appendix 1 for details).<sup>8</sup>

The results show that some platforms have introduced important policy changes to mitigate the risks associated with the pandemic, but that this has been limited to a minority of platforms (for an overview of policies enacted, see Appendix 2). In some cases, especially in the category of fair conditions – concerned with health and safety – these changes appear to have been driven by mandatory government regulations rather than by the platforms themselves. Overall, we find significant shortfalls in platforms’ responses to the pandemic, and we suggest that much more needs to be done to ensure fair working conditions in the platform economy – in the pandemic context as well as beyond.

#### 4.1. Fair pay

Loss of pay has been a major risk for platform workers during the pandemic and it was unsurprisingly the issue of most immediate concern for the majority of workers we talked to for this study. Nevertheless, efforts from platforms to provide financial support were not generally forthcoming. Out of the 191 platforms we analysed, only 21 produced evidence that they had provided workers with some form of direct compensation for income loss due to fewer work opportunities. More than half of those platforms are large multinational companies (Uber, Uber Eats, Glovo, Amazon, Grab) that have the financial capacity to directly compensate workers for income loss. However, a number of smaller local platforms also provided workers with some forms of income support. Although the financial resources at the disposal of the multinational platforms are orders of magnitude larger, thus affording them an increased capacity to institute income protections, the South African domestic cleaning platform SweepSouth, for example, established a fund to which clients and other donors could contribute in order to support workers during lockdown.<sup>9</sup>

In a small number of platforms, we found evidence of other forms of financial support. As many platform workers take on loans to purchase work equipment or rent their vehicles, either directly from the platforms or through companies with which platforms have set up financing agreements, a number of platforms secured the deferral and/or reduction of repayments. However, only 34 platforms, mostly in the ride-hailing and delivery sectors, offered this form of financial support (including, among others, Ola in India, Lyft in the United States, Gojeck in Indonesia, Glovo in Argentina, France, Italy and Spain, and Uber in a number of markets).

Even more limited was the roll-out of loans to workers facing financial difficulties specifically as a result of the pandemic, though this was offered by Uber in

<sup>8</sup> Alongside these three categories, Fairwork has two other important principles for characterizing fair work in the gig economy against which we assess platforms in the usual course of our research. These principles are fair contracts and fair representation (Graham et al. 2020). However, they have been excluded as categories from this analysis because they are less relevant to immediate risk mitigation measures, and they have not been represented in the typology of platform responses for which we have evidence.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://campaign.sweepsouth.com/ss-covid19-fund-2020/>.

Jordan, Grab in Singapore, and Didi Chuxing in China. Lastly, only 21 platforms appear to have implemented policies to maintain a level of business activity that could help support workers' earnings. These included waiving or deferring client fees to encourage more clients to sign up to a platform and expansion into new businesses, as in the cases of ride-hailing platforms offering delivery services and food delivery platforms providing grocery deliveries.

## 4.2. Fair conditions

Health and safety risks associated with COVID-19 spurred a wide array of platform policy responses, ranging from protecting workers and clients from infection to supporting workers who were ill. We classified these types of responses into two sub-categories: *preventive measures* and *illness-related measures*. Compared to provisions under the other two categories (fair pay and fair management), health and safety provisions have experienced the most drastic evolution over the course of the pandemic and have been observed in the largest number of platforms. At the beginning of the pandemic, most platforms refrained from providing their workers with any health and safety protection (to avoid undermining independent contractor classifications), but in the months following the outbreak, platforms needed to show customers and authorities that they were applying stringent safety procedures in order to maintain their social licence to operate.

### 4.2.1. Preventive measures

A shift to socially distanced services was one of the most common responses among platforms, with over 60 per cent of them introducing some form of contact-free service. These policies included making cash-free payments mandatory in order to reduce the handling of paper money. In the ride-hailing sector, where social distancing is more difficult, several platforms gradually provided for the installation of protective panels between drivers and customers. Over time, a large share of platforms started providing workers with free PPE, 63 per cent distributing or refunding the purchase of disinfectants, and 48 per cent providing or refunding the purchase of masks. By August 2020, over 50 countries had made the use of face masks compulsory in public spaces (*Al Jazeera* 2020), obliging many platforms to ensure observance during the provision of services. Additionally, 27 per cent of platforms implemented sanitation measures to protect workers and clients, including the disinfection of vehicles and warehouses, or the closing of hubs. Another relatively common measure was the dissemination of guidelines on avoiding infection, with nearly 50 per cent of platforms providing their workers with some form of guidance, although in most cases these did not go beyond the general health advice issued by governments.

Despite the enactment of a number of policies, evidence shows that the implementation of protective measures was not always effective, several platforms providing PPE only as a one-off measure rather than continuously, and others – including some large ride-hailing and delivery platforms, such as Uber, Uber Eats, Deliveroo, Rappi and Ola – failing to provide PPE to all workers or experiencing difficulties and delays in refunding workers for purchases of PPE

(Anderson 2020; Hadi 2020). Moreover, not all preventive policies were aimed at protecting workers. While contact-free services were introduced by the majority of delivery platforms, they generally included only contact with the final customer, but not contact in restaurants or warehouses, for example. Other policies were aimed at protecting only customers, such as making temperature scans compulsory for workers, or suspending the accounts of workers diagnosed with COVID-19.

#### 4.2.2. Illness-related measures

Just over 50 per cent of platforms provided some form of financial support in the event of workers falling ill with COVID-19. As only a tiny minority of platforms classify their workers as employees or dependent contractors, only a few platforms were able to rely on government-sponsored sick pay schemes, while the others set up private financial support funds. Although the amounts provided varied substantially between platforms and countries, they were generally relatively low compared to platform workers' average earnings and provided as a flat rate, only eight platforms stepping in to guarantee previous levels of pay.

Despite the establishment of a number of illness-related financial support schemes, accessibility often proved problematic. There were several cases of workers being unable to access such schemes when ill, including Deliveroo workers in the United Kingdom and Amazon workers in the United States (Manthorpe 2020; Slisco 2020). In other cases, the proof required to access the scheme, such as a medical certificate, was impossible to obtain for those self-isolating.

### 4.3. Fair management

Only a minority of platforms seem to have implemented positive changes to management policies during the pandemic. In the architecture of many platforms, the number of tasks assigned to a worker or bonus incentives strongly depend on the worker's previous acceptance rate, rating, or other metrics based on tasks already completed. The fact of workers finding it impossible to maintain the same level of activity during the pandemic could therefore hamper future work and pay prospects. Fifty-nine platforms, including Uber and Careem in several countries, Hermes in the United Kingdom, and Amazon in the United States, introduced policies to guarantee no loss of bonuses or incentives in the case of workers being unable to work for a certain period.

Another risk that platform workers from minority groups faced from the onset of the pandemic was heightened discrimination, as explanations or blame for the spread of the virus targeted certain social groups in various contexts. We reviewed actions taken by platforms from March 2020 onwards to protect workers from harassment and discrimination; we found that 28 platforms – including Uber, Uber Eats and Lyft – issued public statements declaring that discrimination against any worker (for example, on the basis of race or nationality) would not be tolerated.

The observed changes to management policies were not necessarily positive for workers, and several commonly encountered measures carried implications

for privacy. As mentioned above, a number of platforms introduced temperature scans for workers; others obliged workers to take selfies to prove that they were wearing masks and/or gloves, or implemented contact tracing tools (Moghe and Rathee 2020; Clarence 2020). These data were often shared directly with customers, with little regard for data protection. Although such policies aimed to ensure general health and safety and reassure customers, they also de facto increased the already high level of surveillance of workers, with little or no communication, or checks and balances, on how their data were managed and used.

The relatively immediate, or stopgap, actions outlined above have been essential in protecting workers during acute phases of the crisis. However, it is clear from this review that in 2020 the majority of the world's platform workers did not benefit from either government assistance or platform support to cushion the economic blow of lockdowns, or to deal with specific risks, such as infection. The question we turn to now is how the provision or absence of support for platform workers during the pandemic may have shifted norms and conventions of labour relations in the platform economy. In the next section we explore workers' responses and the increasing incidence of worker resistance; then we discuss some implications of the pandemic for the digital labour platform business model.

## 5. Platform worker voice and resistance during the COVID-19 pandemic

As the pandemic continued to expose the profound power asymmetry that characterizes labour relations in the platform economy, there was an increase in collective action on the part of platform workers in 2020. Indeed, the heightened levels of physical and economic insecurity during the pandemic, coupled with a lack of adequate protections from platforms, sparked strikes, protests and legal action by platform workers around the world. In South Africa, for instance, drivers for the ride-hailing app Bolt organized several shutdowns in September and October 2020 in protest against decreasing pay rates and inadequate security measures (Mlamla 2020; Malinga 2020). However, despite a number of similar actions taking place across the world, platforms, for the most part, ignored workers' demands. Some platforms even attempted to suppress expressions of collective worker voice. This was the case in India, where the delivery platform Zomato blocked the profiles of riders who participated in strikes (Fairwork 2020b). While the conditions and demands expressed in these worker-led actions were specific to each context, collectively they speak of the influence of pandemic conditions on the growing organizing power and visibility of platform workers.

The delivery strikes in Latin America in the second half of 2020 offer a particularly illuminating example of the innovative strategies that workers employed to mobilize against unfair practices in the platform economy. On 1 July 2020, delivery riders for several prominent platforms in major cities of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador and Mexico organized a series of coordinated mass strikes that attracted international attention. Decreasing pay and lack of

PPE, especially in the early months of the pandemic, were among the main concerns of the thousands of workers who engaged in the numerous protests across the region. These protests were, at least partially, enabled by the same digitalization processes that they were in effect resisting. Social media were a key tool used by workers to mobilize and to elicit public support by raising awareness among consumers of the workers' precarious situation (Pskowski and Vilela 2020). The events in Latin America are particularly significant, insofar as they represent "the first real example of an international, sector-wide, strike movement in the gig economy" (Howson et al. 2020, 20).

An example of successful worker organization for improved protection was seen in the United Kingdom. In November 2020, the High Court of England and Wales ruled in favour of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB), a platform workers' union that had sought an urgent judicial review into whether platform companies were fulfilling their legal obligations to provide workers with PPE (Croft 2020). The IWGB, which represents about 5,000 drivers and couriers, contended that the Government had not properly implemented European Union directives that would entitle platform economy workers to the same health and safety rights as those enjoyed by employees. The workers argued that the issue had become all the more pressing in the light of the pandemic.

Amid the growing insecurity and chaos created by the COVID-19 pandemic, workers also mobilized themselves around ongoing legal battles regarding their employee status. This was the case in the "No on Prop 22" campaign in California. Proposition 22 was a Californian ballot measure introduced in November 2020 by a coalition of powerful platforms – namely, Uber, Lyft, Postmates, Instacart and DoorDash – in response to Assembly Bill 5 (AB5).<sup>10</sup> AB5 is a labour law passed by the California State Assembly in 2019 requiring that all platform workers in the state be reclassified as employees – and therefore that platform companies provide them with the full suite of employee benefits, including overtime pay, paid sick leave and employer-provided healthcare. Proposition 22 sought to exempt app-based transportation and delivery companies from AB5, and instead introduce a "middle ground" that would see platform workers receive some protections and benefits, but substantially fewer than their entitlements under AB5 (Steward et al. 2020).

The worker-led campaign against Proposition 22 received unprecedented levels of support from labour movements both within the United States and internationally. The platforms initially managed to get the ballot measure passed during the 2020 US presidential election, after a well-funded advertising campaign (Hussain, Bhuiyan and Menezes 2020), but the measure was later overturned, being ruled unconstitutional by the Alameda Superior Court of California (Tusk 2021). Although Proposition 22 was eventually struck down, the events surrounding its initial adoption are a sobering reminder of the immense lobbying power of multinational labour platforms. The experience also prompted a call to action for worker associations and political groups to prevent platforms from replicating the model elsewhere, and suggesting fairer alternatives, such as

<sup>10</sup> State of California, Assembly Bill No. 5, approved 18 September 2019.

the recent EU Directive on Digital Platform Workers (Chaibi 2020).<sup>11</sup> In February 2021, the UK Supreme Court upheld the claim to worker status (and attendant rights and protections, including the minimum wage) of a group of Uber drivers represented by the App Drivers and Couriers Union (Butler 2021). Although this was a significant victory for platform worker power in the United Kingdom and internationally, Uber has yet to comply fully with the ruling, which stipulated that the drivers are entitled to the rights afforded by worker status during all the hours they are logged in and available to work. The platform only agreed to ensure the minimum wage and other benefits during the time workers are actively on a job.

It is clear that the pandemic has increased pressure on platform workers and pushed precariousness and unsafe working conditions to an untenable extreme in many cases. This has in turn provided an impetus for collective resistance at a scale not seen before in the platform economy (Howson et al. 2020). It has also given rise to new strategies by platforms to preserve their exploitative business models. It remains yet to be seen whether worker movements can consolidate themselves sufficiently to make lasting gains.

## **6. Protect workers or please shareholders? How the pandemic exposes the contradictory logic of the platform business model**

From their inception, labour platforms have deliberately positioned themselves – both rhetorically and legally – as “technology companies” or “digital market-places” that are in the business of matching those who want to sell various services with those who want to buy them (Woodcock and Graham 2020). In so doing, platforms have created an artificial distance between themselves and the workers who tender their labour via the platform’s digital interfaces. In the majority of jurisdictions, despite the substantial control they exert over their workers’ earnings and working conditions, platforms have steadfastly maintained that they are not employers and that platform workers are, therefore, not their employees. By contractually classifying workers as independent contractors (or as self-employed workers or similar), platforms have largely been able to circumvent costly employer obligations such as social security payments. Moreover, platform workers – unlike most other formal workers – do not enjoy hard-won employment protections such as a minimum wage and sick pay.

However, this business model has come under increasing critical scrutiny in recent years, as scholarship and media attention have focused public awareness on the dangers of platform work (Schor 2020). The *modus operandi* of gig economy platforms has also become more difficult to justify and maintain in the light of the mounting – and in many cases, entirely preventable – number of human tragedies resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although platform

---

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on Improving Working Conditions in Platform Work, Brussels, 9 December 2021, COM(2021) 762 final.



work has always been characterized by poor working conditions (see, for example, Cant 2019), the health crisis has added a new and urgent dimension to this problem. Moreover, the question of safeguarding workers' health during the pandemic – given the people-facing nature of much platform work, including delivery and ride-hailing services – is directly linked to that of safeguarding the health of the body politic.

Notwithstanding the positive measures that platforms have introduced in response to the pandemic, we have also seen resistance to implementing certain basic measures and note that many workers have remained without protections. In part, this must be attributed to the fact that these measures run counter to the logic that has fuelled the tremendous success of the platform economy from the start. Even though most worker protections have been basically piecemeal, inadequate and difficult to access, by enacting them, platforms are *implicitly* admitting their responsibility for workers' financial and health risks. As some of us have recently argued with respect to Uber, “[f]or a company that has repeatedly insisted that it does not ‘employ’ its drivers, these provisions represent an about-turn. They implicitly acknowledge that Uber has significant control over the conditions, health, and even survival of its drivers, making it far more than the proprietor of a digital marketplace” (Katta et al. 2020, 205). In essence, the pandemic has pushed digital labour platforms into a difficult corner, where they claimed not to be employers while in practice introducing measures akin to employment protections. The contradictory limbo currently occupied by platform economy companies is providing encouragement for pro-worker litigation on questions of employment classification, as well as an opportunity for regulators to ensure that platforms take responsibility by providing workers with durable and institutionalized protections even beyond the pandemic.

Although there is some cause for optimism about the opportunities afforded to litigators and regulators by platforms' COVID-19 policies, there is also cause for concern because of an opposing trend: although platforms have made some concessions to workers in the form of sick pay and limited income compensation, they have also had substantial success in influencing lawmakers to develop regulation that entrenches and enables their business strategy at the expense of workers' rights and protections. Political and legal disputes during the pandemic highlight platforms' increasing dominance in shaping public opinion, and how this is translated into regulation. In the United States, the lobbying power of platforms was revealed in the success of the “Yes on Prop 22” campaign, which in turn gave platforms a financial boost from venture capital and customers (Ustek-Spilda et al. 2020).

Uber, Lyft and their allies spent a staggering amount of money to make the case for Proposition 22. The US\$200 million invested in the campaign was the largest sum ever spent on a ballot in US history. By contrast, worker advocates raised approximately one tenth of that amount. Uber, in particular, made liberal use of its platform interface to share political messaging and campaign propaganda with drivers and riders. When the ballot measure was passed, Uber's and Lyft's shares rose by 18 and 22 per cent, respectively, representing a gain many times greater than the US\$200 million invested. Even though Proposition 22 was later ruled unconstitutional, this historic moment does not indicate an impending

consensus regarding the role and responsibility of platforms; it rather amplifies pre-existing domains of contestation between regulators, platform companies and workers. The substantial leverage that platforms were able to exert may have also derived from the fact that the services they broker, such as delivery, have been shown to be essential to the public health response to the pandemic.

## **7. Conclusion: What new normal will the pandemic create in the platform economy?**

Our research demonstrates that some platforms have stepped in where workers faced pandemic-related risks that were not addressed by social or government protections. Fundamentally, this shows that platforms have defining power over workers' safety and labour conditions (Ustek-Spilda, Heeks and Graham 2020). However, our evidence also demonstrates that most platforms have not adequately lived up to the responsibility that is commensurate with that power, so that in the absence of labour protections and government interventions, many platform workers have fallen through the cracks. In this article we have suggested some underlying structural reasons for platforms' reluctance to institute protective measures and ensure platform workers' rights during the pandemic. Our wider research has also shown that platform power is exercised in different ways in different contexts. In some cases, platforms have adopted alternative strategies to the entrenchment of independent worker classification, as seen in California. In Germany, for example, local labour and public transportation laws have forced Uber to adapt its strategy by commissioning private intermediaries that employ its drivers (Fairwork 2020c). However, these subcontracted employment arrangements can also leave workers in a precarious and vulnerable situation. Several drivers in Germany told us that, despite being employed by an intermediary, they earned less than the minimum wage. Drivers were also uncertain as to whether they were covered by accident insurance (Fairwork 2020c). These findings are reinforced by our research in South Africa (Fairwork 2020d) and India (Fairwork 2020b). Across these contexts, we have observed that platforms interact with social, political and economic environments in a variety of customized ways, but always with the common goal of evading or circumventing unfavourable regulatory frameworks and undermining workers' collective resistance.

However, there are several points of leverage that indicate possible ways to tame the power of platforms (Woodcock and Graham 2020; Ustek-Spilda et al. 2020). Alongside the importance of workers' associational power, the efficacy of which has been demonstrated during the pandemic in the example of unions' successful litigation in the United Kingdom, we see other complementary prospects for positive change. For example, Evgeny Morozov (2020) argues that digital platform technology has become so important in mediating economic processes and directing their distributional outcomes that these digital infrastructures should be treated as a public good. One avenue for shared ownership and governance of platform infrastructures is found in the nascent platform co-operative movement (Scholz 2016). However, while promising, platform cooperatives have so far struggled to gain any kind of competitive foothold against

established platform companies whose focus has remained on gaining near-monopolistic market shares, even where it means subsidizing services at a continual financial loss. Given this market imbalance, another way to keep platforms' asymmetric power in check could be through antitrust mechanisms. As Sanjukta Paul argues, such a strategy could help reallocate governance "toward the smaller players and away from the dominant ones", so that "a municipality could run the app and publicly coordinate the market, taking into account public interest" (interview in Angwin 2020).

Such interventions remain theoretical without government investment, however. Even as the pandemic entrenches platform-mediated inequalities and corporate power, we are witnessing platforms begin to serve an increasingly infrastructural function. Yet, unmatched by public accountability, this leads to a lack of democratic governance in the platform economy. As we have shown, during the pandemic financial markets have rewarded platforms for successfully evading legal and social responsibilities. It is therefore more important now than ever to reimagine what platforms are and what they do in a post-pandemic world. In this article we have pointed to one possible point of entry, whereby the protections introduced during the pandemic can be used both to set a new minimum benchmark for platform worker protections and to challenge platforms' arguments regarding their level of legal responsibility towards their workers. Without continued attention to the ways in which the current mechanisms of the platform economy are inherently structured against workers, and a matching social and political challenge to this state of affairs, it may be impossible to avoid a future of work that simply accelerates the race to the bottom in labour standards and worker protections.

## References

- Al Jazeera. 2020. "Which Countries Have Made Wearing Face Masks Compulsory?" 17 August 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/countries-wearing-face-masks-compulsory-200423094510867.html/>.
- Anderson, Tom. 2020. "A Delivery Rider Accuses Deliveroo of Not Taking Workers' Health Seriously". *Canary*, 21 April 2020. <https://www.thecanary.co/exclusive/2020/04/21/a-delivery-rider-accuses-deliveroo-of-not-taking-workers-health-seriously/>.
- Angwin, Julia. 2020. "The Antitrust Case for Gig Worker Rights". *Markup*, 7 November 2020. <https://www.getrevue.co/profile/themarkup/issues/the-antitrust-case-for-gig-worker-rights-289982>.
- Apouey, Bénédicte, Alexandra Roulet, Isabelle Solal, and Mark Stabile. 2020. "Gig Workers during the COVID-19 Crisis in France: Financial Precarity and Mental Well-Being". *Journal of Urban Health* 97 (6): 776–795.
- Baig, Aamer, Bryce Hall, Paul Jenkins, Eric Lamarre, and Brian McCarthy. 2020. "The COVID-19 Recovery Will Be Digital: A Plan for the First 90 Days". *McKinsey Digital*, 14 May 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/the-covid-19-recovery-will-be-digital-a-plan-for-the-first-90-days#>.
- Berg, Janine, Marianne Furrer, Ellie Harmon, Uma Rani, and M. Six Silberman. 2018. *Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work: Towards Decent Work in the Online World*. Geneva: ILO.
- Belger, Tom. 2020. "Coronavirus: Gig Workers Sue UK Government over Support for Self-Employed". *Yahoo Finance UK*, 8 May 2020. <https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/coronavirus-uber-legal-action-gig-workers-sue-uk-government-rights-230055092.html>.

- Blundell, Jack, Stephen Machin, and Maria Ventura. 2020. "Covid-19 and the Self-Employed: Six Months into the Crisis", Centre for Economic Performance Working Paper No. 012. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Bogg, Alan. 2019. "Taken for a Ride: Workers in the Gig Economy". *Law Quarterly Review* 135 (April): 219–226.
- Butler, Sarah. 2021. "Uber Drivers Entitled to Workers' Rights, UK Supreme Court Rules". *Guardian*, 19 February 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/feb/19/uber-drivers-workers-uk-supreme-court-rules-rights>.
- Cant, Callum. 2019. *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in The New Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chaibi, Leïla. 2020. "A Proposal to Legislate for the Rights of Platform Workers". *Social Europe*, 16 November 2020. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/a-proposal-to-legislate-for-the-rights-of-platform-workers/>.
- Clarance, Andrew. 2020. "Aarogya Setu: Why India's Covid-19 Contact Tracing App Is Controversial". *BBC News*, 15 May 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52659520/>.
- Croft, Jane. 2020. "UK Gig Economy Workers Win High Court Battle over PPE". *Financial Times*, 13 November 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/b7b2dc47-305f-4aee-a74e-0ad16c71d63c>.
- Fairwork. 2020a. "The Gig Economy and Covid-19: Looking Ahead". September 2020. Oxford.
- . 2020b. *Fairwork India Ratings 2020: Labour Standards in the Platform Economy*. Oxford.
- . 2020c. *Fairwork Germany Ratings 2020: Labour Standards in the Platform Economy*. Oxford.
- . 2020d. "Gig Workers, Platforms and Government during Covid-19 in South Africa". May 2020. Oxford.
- Flourish. 2020a. "The Digital Hustle: Gig Worker Financial Lives Under Pressure". Indonesia Spotlight September 2020. Washington, DC.
- . 2020b. "The Digital Hustle: Gig Worker Financial Lives under Pressure." India Spotlight September 2020. Washington, DC.
- Forde, Chris, Mark Stuart, Simon Joyce, Liz Oliver, Danat Valizade, Gabriella Alberti, Kate Hardy et al. 2017. "The Social Protection of Workers in the Platform Economy". Study for the European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs. Brussels: European Parliament.
- Gentilini, Ugo, Mohamed Almenfi, Pamela Dale, John Blomquist, Harish Natarajan, Guillermo Galicia, Robert Palacios, and Vyjayanti Desai. 2020. "Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures", Living Paper Version 10, 22 May 2020. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Gopinath, Gita. 2020. "The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn since the Great Depression". *IMF Blog*, 14 April 2020. <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/>.
- Graham, Mark, and Mohammad Amir Anwar. 2019. "The Global Gig Economy: Towards a Planetary Labour Market?" *First Monday*. 24 (4). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i4.9913>.
- Graham, Mark, Jamie Woodcock, Richard Heeks, Paul Mungai, Jean-Paul Van Belle, Darcy du Toit, Sandra Fredman, Abigail Osiki, Anri van der Spuy, and Six M. Silberman. 2020. "The Fairwork Foundation: Strategies for Improving Platform Work in a Global Context". *Geoforum* 112 (June): 100–103.
- Hadi, Abdurzak. 2020. "I'm an Uber Driver Who Watched a Young Colleague Die from Coronavirus. Now I'm Suing the Government for Failing to Protect Us". *Independent*, 16 April 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/coronavirus-deaths-uber-ayub-akthar-cab-drivers-key-workers-a9468146.html>.

- Heeks, Richard, Mark Graham, Paul Mungai, Jean-Paul Van Belle, and Jamie Woodcock. 2020. "Systematic Evaluation of Platform Work against Decent Work Standards; Development of a New Framework and Application in the Global South", Digital Development Working Paper Series, No. 85. Manchester: Centre for Digital Development.
- Howson, Kelle, Funda Ustek-Spilda, Rafael Grohmann, Nancy Salem, Rodrigo Carelli, Daniel Abs, Julice Salvagni et al. 2020. "'Just Because You Don't See Your Boss, Doesn't Mean You Don't Have a Boss': Covid-19 and Gig Worker Strikes across Latin America". *International Union Rights* 27 (3): 20–28.
- Hussain, Suhauna, Johana Bhuiyan, and Ryan Menezes. 2020. "How Uber and Lyft Persuaded California to Vote Their Way". *Los Angeles Times*, 13 November 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-11-13/how-uber-lyft-door-dash-won-proposition-22/>.
- ILO. 2020. "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work", 4th ed., 27 May 2020. Geneva.
- IMF (International Monetary Fund). 2020. "World Economic Outlook: The Great Lockdown". April 2020. Washington, DC.
- Katta, Srulana, Adam Badger, Mark Graham, Kelle Howson, Funda Ustek-Spilda, and Alessio Bertolini. 2020. "(Dis)embeddedness and (De)commodification: COVID-19, Uber, and the Unravelling Logics of the Gig Economy". *Dialogues in Human Geography* 10 (2): 203–207.
- Lord, Carolynne, Oliver Bates, Adrian Friday, Fraser McLeod, Andy Oakey, Tom Cherrett, and Toni Martinez-Sykora. 2020. "Written Evidence Submitted by the FlipGig project (COV0123)". Call for Evidence Submission to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, June 2020. London: UK Parliament.
- Malev, Milko. 2020. "Is the Coronavirus Pandemic an Engine for the Digital Transformation?" *DMEXCO*, 3 April 2020. <https://dmexco.com/stories/is-the-coronavirus-pandemic-an-engine-for-the-digital-transformation/>.
- Malinga, Sibahle. 2020. "Bolt Drivers, Operators March against 'Exploitation'". *ITWeb*, 23 September 2020. <https://www.itweb.co.za/content/o1Jr5qx9Z39vKdWL/>.
- Manthorpe, Rowland. 2020. "Coronavirus: Deliveroo Riders Say They Can't Access Promised Hardship Fund". *Sky News*, 18 March 2020. <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-deliveroo-riders-say-they-cant-access-promised-hardship-fund-11959632/>.
- Mawii, Zothan. 2020. "Covid-19 and Relief Measures for Gig Workers in India". *Centre for Internet & Society*, 14 April 2020. <https://cis-india.org/raw/zothan-mawii-covid-19-and-relief-measures-for-gig-workers-in-india>.
- Mawii, Zothan, Aayush Rath, and Ambika Tandon. 2020. "From Health and Harassment to Income Security and Loans, India's Gig Workers Need Support". *Centre for Internet & Society*, 30 April 2020. <https://cis-india.org/raw/gig-workers-need-support>.
- Mlamla, Sisonke. 2020. "Uber, Bolt Drivers in SA Protest Over Low Wages and Exploitation". *IOL*, 13 October 2020. <https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/motoring/uber-bolt-drivers-in-sa-protest-over-low-wages-and-exploitation-7e45c944-bb6f-428a-8842-fbeac2b6a56a#:~:text=Bolt%20South%20Africa%20manager%20Gareth,ability%20to%20hail%20a%20ride/>.
- Moghe, Ritwik, and Sunil Rathee. 2020. "Facing up to a Pandemic: A Look at Swiggy's Efforts to Counter the COVID-19 Threat". *Swiggy Bytes*, 8 May 2020. <https://bytes.swiggy.com/facing-up-to-a-pandemic-a-look-at-swiggy-s-efforts-to-counter-the-covid-19-threat-7b9ec0bd7e5f>.
- Morozov, Evgeny. 2020. "Digital Public Infrastructure: The Social Democratic Project of the Twenty-First Century", *Wiso Direkt*, 08/2020. Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Moulds, Josephine. 2020. "Gig Workers Among the Hardest Hit by Coronavirus Pandemic". *World Economic Forum*, 21 April 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/gig-workers-hardest-hit-coronavirus-pandemic/>.



- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2020. "Evaluating the Initial Impact of COVID-19 Containment Measures on Economic Activity". 10 June 2020. Paris.
- Pacis, Jessamine. 2020. "A Catch-22 for On-Demand Cleaners in the Philippines". *Bot Populi*, 1 May 2020. <https://botpopuli.net/a-catch-22-for-on-demand-cleaners-in-the-philippines/>.
- Prawira Adjie, Moch. Fiqih. 2020. "App-Based 'Ojek' Drivers Demand Compensation as New Social Restrictions Bar Them from Taking Passengers". *Jakarta Post*, 8 April 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/07/app-based-ojek-drivers-demand-compensation-as-new-social-restrictions-bar-them-from-taking-passengers.html/>.
- Pskowski, Martha, and Rafael Vilela. 2020. "'They Aren't Anything Without Us': Gig Workers Are Striking Throughout Latin America". *Vice*, 11 August 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgxazk/they-arent-anything-without-us-gig-workers-are-striking-throughout-latin-america/>.
- Romo, Vanessa. 2020. "Self-Employed and Gig Workers Face Long Waits for Coronavirus Relief Checks". *NPR*, 17 April 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/17/836670935/self-employed-and-gig-workers-face-long-waits-for-coronavirus-relief-checks/>.
- Scholz, Trebor. 2016. *Platform Cooperativism: Challenging the Corporate Sharing Economy*. New York, NY: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.
- Schor, Juliet B. 2020. *After the Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked and How to Win It Back*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Schwellnus, Cyrille, Assaf Geva, Mathilde Pak, and Rafael Veiel. 2019. "Gig Economy Platforms: Boon or Bane?" OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 1550. Paris: OECD.
- Slisco, Aila. 2020. "Amazon Warehouse Workers Say Company Isn't Actually Providing Promised Paid Sick Leave". *Newsweek*, 8 April 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/amazon-warehouse-workers-say-company-isnt-actually-providing-promised-paid-sick-leave-1496965/>.
- Sneader, Kevin, and Shubham Singhal. 2020. "The Future Is Not What It Used to Be: Thoughts on the Shape of the Next Normal". *McKinsey & Company*, 14 April 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/the-future-is-not-what-it-used-to-be-thoughts-on-the-shape-of-the-next-normal>.
- Stanford, Jim. 2017. "The Resurgence of Gig Work: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives". *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 28 (3): 382–401.
- Steward, Shelly, Pablo Aguera Reneses, Srujana Katta, and Mark Graham. 2020. "California's Proposition 22 Presents an Alarming Turning Point in Labor Law". *Fairwork*, 28 October 2020. <https://fair.work/en/fw/blog/proposition-22/>.
- Tusk, Bradley. 2021. "A California Judge Just Struck Down Prop 22: Now What?" *TechCrunch*, 24 August 2021. <https://techcrunch.com/2021/08/24/a-california-judge-just-struck-down-prop-22-now-what/>.
- Ustek-Spilda, Funda, Fabian Ferrari, Matt Cole, Pablo Aguera Reneses, and Mark Graham. 2020. "The Infrastructural Power of Platform Capitalism". *Social Europe*, 16 December 2020. <https://socialeurope.eu/the-infrastructural-power-of-platform-capitalism>.
- Ustek-Spilda, Funda, Richard Heeks, and Mark Graham. 2020. "Covid-19: Who Will Protect Gig Workers, if Not Platforms?" *Social Europe*, 28 May 2020. <https://www.social-europe.eu/covid-19-who-will-protect-gig-workers-if-not-platforms/>.
- Woodcock, Jamie, and Mark Graham. 2020. *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.



## Appendix 1

### List of platform responses to COVID-19

Policy category	Subcategory	Platform action
1. Fair pay	Pay loss compensation	Additional payments to compensate for loss of income, including increase in pay rates
	Financial deferral	Emergency loan facility Asking renters to reduce vehicle/other rental costs Loan repayment suspension Deferral of loan/rental costs
	Attempted compensation by creating income opportunities	Expansion of scope of service to try to increase business for platform and workers (e.g. ride-hailing adding delivery fee; meal delivery adding grocery delivery fee)  Waiver of customer fees to try to maintain level of business  Stopping the onboarding of new workers to preserve income for existing workers  Contact-free delivery, including no signature and no cash payment for delivery
2a. Fair conditions (prevention)	Physical protection (workers)	Physical barriers installed in vehicles  Suspension of the accounts of customers diagnosed with COVID-19 Additional sanitization by platform, e.g. of vehicles, warehouses, hubs, etc. Contact-free management via closure of physical hubs Destroying all unpackaged goods, against contamination Social distancing/other measures in upstream supply chain (e.g. food preparation and grocery picking/packing)
	Physical protection (consumers/general population)	Suspension of the accounts of drivers diagnosed with COVID-19 Travel ban policy in line with the latest guidelines given by local/national authorities Suspension of some services
	Personal protection	Provision of disinfectant (gel, spray) to workers Provision of masks to workers Instruction to follow best hygiene practices Mandatory use of PPE, including monitoring of worker hygiene practices
	Virus safety knowledge	Provision of standard virus health practice information Provision of virus safety training
	Healthcare assistance	Medical check-ups, including temperature scans Access to general health advice Access to personal health advice (paid/provided by platform)

(continued overleaf)

## List of platform responses to COVID-19 (concl.)

Policy category	Subcategory	Platform action
<b>2b. Fair conditions (illness)</b>	Sick pay	Sick pay for workers who are ill or in mandatory quarantine (14 days) Usual pay rate for workers who are ill or in mandatory quarantine (14 days) Financial support fund (use to be clarified but usually for sick pay) <a href="#">Workers made to sign agreements that sick pay was pandemic-specific and does not change employment status</a>
	Insurance	Platform provision of health insurance, or credit on health savings account
	Death benefits	Provision of death benefits
<b>3. Fair contracts</b>	[No example policies found]	[Beneficial changes to worker terms and conditions/ contracts/status as a result of COVID-19]
<b>4. Fair management</b>	Algorithmic penalty protection	No loss of incentive level despite lower level of work  Unlimited unpaid time off without penalty
	Anti-discrimination	Platform statement to customers that discrimination against certain worker groups during the pandemic (e.g. on spurious hygiene grounds) will not be tolerated
<b>5. Fair representation</b>	[No example policies found]	[Formal receipt of, engagement with, and action on COVID-19-related demands from worker representatives]  <a href="#">[Dismissal of workers if they engage in organization of workers during the pandemic]</a>
<b>Other</b>	Donation	Substantial donation or other assistance (e.g. free services) to national health services, community funds or similar
	Hiring	Hiring initiative for unemployed workers (does not benefit current workers)
	<a href="#">Service contraction</a>	<a href="#">Contraction of scope of services, e.g. to emergency provision only</a>

Note: Entries in black benefit platform workers; entries in light grey appear to be particularly for the benefit of the platform but with some potential benefit for workers; entries in light blue are likely to have negative consequences for workers; entries in dark blue have negative consequences for workers; entries between square brackets refer to responses for which no examples were found.  
Source: Authors' compilation based on the Fairwork categories of fairness in working conditions (Graham et al. 2020).

## Appendix 2

### Platforms adopting key policies to protect gig workers, as at September 2020

		Policy category (and sub-category)										
		1. Fair pay		2a. Fair conditions (prevention)				2b. Fair conditions (illness)			3. Fair management	
		Pay loss compensation	Financial deferral	Physical protection	Personal protection	Virus safety knowledge	Healthcare assistance	Sick pay	Insurance	Death benefits	Penalty protection	Anti-discrimination
	Platforms											
Algeria	Temtem				●							
	Yassir			●	●							
	Wesselni											
	Careem			●				●			●	
Argentina	Cabify			●	●	●	●					
	Beat			●	●	●	●				●	
	Glovo	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			
	Uber		●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
Armenia	Yandex.taxi			●	●			●				
	InDriver											
	GG			●	●							
	Menu.am			●	●							
	Sovats.am			●	●							
	Bolt				●							
Australia	Uber		●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Uber Eats			●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Deliveroo			●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	Menulog			●								
	Coles			●	●							
Bahrain	Careem			●	●			●			●	
	Talabat			●			●					
	HungerStation											
Bangladesh	Uber	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Sheba.xyz			●	●	●	●					
	Truck Lagbe			●	●	●	●					
Brazil	Uber		●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Cabify			●	●	●	●					
	iFood			●	●	●	●	●	●			
Chile	Uber	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Uber Eats			●	●	●	●	●			●	●

(continued overleaf)

## Platforms adopting key policies to protect gig workers, as at September 2020 (cont.)

		Policy category (and sub-category)									
		1. Fair pay		2a. Fair conditions (prevention)				2b. Fair conditions (illness)		3. Fair management	
		Pay loss compensation	Financial deferral	Physical protection	Personal protection	Virus safety knowledge	Healthcare assistance	Sick pay	Insurance	Death benefits	Penalty protection
											Anti-discrimination
Chile (cont.)	Didi			•	•			•			
	Cabify			•	•	•	•				
	Beat			•	•	•	•				•
	Rappi			•	•			•			
China	Didi Chuxing		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Meituan Dache		•	•	•	•	•				•
	Meituan			•	•	•	•	•		•	•
	Peisong										
	Ele (Fengniao Peisong)			•	•		•	•		•	•
	FlashEx			•	•		•	•		•	•
	Dianwoda			•	•		•				•
Denmark	DADA Kuaisong			•	•		•	•			•
	Wolt			•	•	•	•	•			
Egypt	Just Eat			•	•	•	•	•			
	Uber	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			•
	Otlob			•	•	•	•	•			•
	Swvl			•	•	•	•	•			
France	Jumia			•							
	Uber		•	•	•	•	•	•			•
	Uber Eats			•	•	•	•	•			•
	Deliveroo			•	•	•	•	•			
	Frichti			•	•	•	•				
	Glovo		•	•			•	•	•		
Georgia	Just Eat			•	•	•	•				
	Yandex taxi			•				•			
	GG			•							
	Glovo			•	•	•	•	•			
Germany	Bolt				•						
	Uber		•	•	•	•	•	•			•
	Clevershuttle			•	•	•	•	•	•		•
Ghana	Lieferando			•	•						•
	Uber	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			•
	Bolt			•	•						
	Jumia Food			•	•		•				

## Platforms adopting key policies to protect gig workers, as at September 2020 (cont.)

		Policy category (and sub-category)										
		1. Fair pay		2a. Fair conditions (prevention)				2b. Fair conditions (illness)			3. Fair management	
		Pay loss compensation	Financial deferral	Physical protection	Personal protection	Virus safety knowledge	Healthcare assistance	Sick pay	Insurance	Death benefits	Penalty protection	Anti-discrimination
India	Amazon	•		•	•		•	•			•	
	Uber		•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•
	Ola		•	•	•	•	•	•				
	Zomato			•		•	•	•				
	Swiggy			•	•	•	•	•				
	BigBasket			•	•							
	Grofers	•		•	•	•	•	•				
	HouseJoy				•	•	•					
	Dunzo			•	•	•	•					
	UrbanClap			•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Flipkart	•		•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Shadowfax			•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Rapido			•	•		•		•			
Indonesia	Grab			•	•		•	•	•			
	Gojek		•	•	•	•	•	•				
Iraq	Careem			•	•			•			•	
Italy	Glovo		•	•	•	•	•	•	•			
	Deliveroo			•	•	•	•	•				
	Just Eat			•	•	•	•					
	Uber		•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•
	Uber Eats			•	•	•	•	•			•	•
Jordan	Careem			•	•			•			•	
	Uber		•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•
	Talabat			•	•							
	Basket			•	•							
Kenya	Jumia Food			•	•		•					
	Bolt			•	•							
	Lynk				•							
	Sendy			•	•	•	•		•			
	Uber	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•
Lebanon	Careem			•				•			•	
	Zomato				•		•					
	Toters			•	•							

(continued overleaf)

### Platforms adopting key policies to protect gig workers, as at September 2020 (cont.)

		Policy category (and sub-category)										
		1. Fair pay		2a. Fair conditions (prevention)				2b. Fair conditions (illness)			3. Fair management	
		Pay loss compensation	Financial deferral	Physical protection	Personal protection	Virus safety knowledge	Healthcare assistance	Sick pay	Insurance	Death benefits	Penalty protection	Anti-discrimination
	Platforms											
Morocco	Careem			●	●			●			●	
	Yassir											
	Jumia				●	●	●					
	Jumia Food				●	●	●					
New Zealand	Uber				●	●	●					
	Uber Eats			●	●	●	●					
	DeliverEasy			●	●							
	MenuLog			●	●							
	Zoomy			●	●	●	●					
	Ola				●	●	●					
Nigeria	Jumia Food			●	●		●					
	Bolt			●	●							
	Uber	●	●		●	●	●	●			●	●
Occupied Palestinian Territory	Careem			●	●			●			●	
Oman	Talabat			●								
Pakistan	Bykea				●		●	●				
	Foodpanda			●								
	Careem			●	●	●	●	●	●		●	
Philippines	Grab		●	●	●	●	●	●				
Qatar	Careem			●	●			●				
	Talabat			●	●							
	Carriage											
Russian Federation	Yandex taxi			●	●	●	●	●				
	InDriver			●	●							
	Maxim				●							
	YouDo				●							
	Delivery Club	●										
	Bolt				●							



## Platforms adopting key policies to protect gig workers, as at September 2020 (cont.)

		Policy category (and sub-category)										
		1. Fair pay		2a. Fair conditions (prevention)				2b. Fair conditions (illness)			3. Fair management	
		Pay loss compensation	Financial deferral	Physical protection	Personal protection	Virus safety knowledge	Healthcare assistance	Sick pay	Insurance	Death benefits	Penalty protection	Anti-discrimination
	Platforms											
Saudi Arabia	Careem		●	●	●			●				
	HungerStation			●								
	Lugmety			●	●							
	Carriage			●								
Serbia	Car.Go			●								
	alideda			●								
	Donesi			●								
	Bolt				●							
	Wolt			●	●	●	●					
Singapore	Grab	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	
	Deliveroo			●	●	●	●	●			●	
South Africa	Uber	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Uber Eats	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Bolt			●	●	●	●					
	SweepSouth	●		●	●	●	●	●		●		
	OrderIn											
	Mr D	●		●	●	●	●	●				
	getTOD			●	●							
	NoSweat											
	M4Jam	●			●	●	●				●	
	Picup			●	●							
Spain	Glovo		●	●	●	●	●	●	●			
	Deliveroo			●	●	●	●	●				
	Just Eat			●	●	●	●					
	Uber		●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Uber Eats			●	●	●	●	●			●	●
Sri Lanka	Uber	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	PickMe				●	●	●					
Tunisia	Yassir											
	Founa			●	●							
	IntiGo			●	●							
	Jumia			●								
	Jumia Food			●								

(continued overleaf)

### Platforms adopting key policies to protect gig workers, as at September 2020 (concl.)

		Policy category (and sub-category)										
		1. Fair pay		2a. Fair conditions (prevention)				2b. Fair conditions (illness)			3. Fair management	
		Pay loss compensation	Financial deferral	Physical protection	Personal protection	Virus safety knowledge	Healthcare assistance	Sick pay	Insurance	Death benefits	Penalty protection	Anti-discrimination
	Platforms											
Turkey	Yemeksepeti			●	●							
	Banabi			●								
	Bitaksi	●										
	Istegelsin			●	●							
	Migros Hemen+ Getir			●	●	●	●					
		●		●	●	●	●	●	●			
Ukraine	Raketa			●	●							
	Uber				●	●	●					
	Bolt			●	●							
	Glovo			●	●	●	●					
United Arab Emirates	Uber		●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Deliveroo			●	●	●	●					
	Talabat			●	●			●				
	Careem			●	●			●			●	
	Zomato			●	●	●						
United Kingdom	Deliveroo			●	●	●	●	●				
	Uber		●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Uber Eats			●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
	JustEat			●	●	●	●	●				
	DPD		●	●	●	●	●	●				
	Hermes			●	●	●	●	●			●	
	Kapten			●	●	●	●					
	Syft			●	●	●	●					
	Bolt			●	●	●	●	●			●	
United States	Amazon	●		●	●		●	●			●	
	Uber		●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Uber Eats			●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Lyft		●	●	●	●	●	●			●	●
	Postmates			●		●	●	●	●			
	Doordash			●		●	●	●				
	Instacart			●	●			●				
	Grubhub			●	●	●	●	●			●	

Source: Authors' compilation based on the Fairwork categories of fairness in working conditions (Graham et al. 2020).