

Research project title: **Collective representation and action of workers in the platform economy**

Proponent: **Alumni Research Group-Collective representation and action of workers in the platform economy**

Research Coordinators: **Melisa R. Serrano and Edlira Xhafa**

Background

The platform economy involves three parties—the internet-based platform (or app), which wields the dominant position among the parties, the users who are the final recipients of the service, and the platform workers who are providing a service via the platform. In essence, the platform economy involves the outsourcing of tasks to a large pool of workers via the intermediary which is the internet platform.

In the literature, the terms platform economy, gig economy, digital economy, and digital labour platforms are used interchangeably. Digital labour platforms can be either web-based or location-based. In the case of the former, contingent (task- or project-based) intangible work is delivered digitally and organised via online outsourcing platforms that bring together buyers and sellers¹. Meanwhile, for location-based digital labour platforms, the organisation of work is digitized and the service allocated via a platform is tangible and delivered to a client in a physical location.²

According to Stanford, the rise of platform work is part of the continuing capitalist objective of creating more precarious jobs.³ He adds that platform work is associated with the fall of the standard employment relationship as a result of ongoing preoccupation of private employers with profitably extracting acceptable levels of work effort from their employees. Thus, the rise of platform work reflects not just technological innovation, particularly in the services sector, but also the evolution of broad social relationships and power imbalances.

In general, flexibilisation and individualization characterize work in the digital economy. The following are some of the employment and working conditions of workers engaged in platform work:

- No wage standards; payments are sometimes delayed or unfair compared with the amount of effort or skill expended
- Unclear and irregular working hours
- Difference in time zones interferes with work-life balance
- Lack of information on who the client is and the purpose of the task, poor communication and feedback, and opacity of procedures
- Workers find themselves unable to upgrade their skills or are constrained by the specificity of their profile
- Job instability as there's no guarantee that workers will find work; work can be volatile and uncertain

¹ Heeks, R. 2017. Decent Work and the Digital Gig Economy: A Developing Country Perspective on Employment Impacts and Standards in Online Outsourcing, Crowdwork, etc. Development Informatics Working Paper No. 71 United Kingdom, Centre for Development Informatics, Global Development Institute, University of Manchester.

² Ibid.

³ Stanford, J. 2017. The resurgence of gig work: Historical and theoretical perspectives. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*. DOI: 10.177/10/35304617724303.

- Most workers are independent contractors and this removes many labor rights and social protections from them (worker misclassification as independent contractors)
- Workers are left to manage their own occupational safety and health protection
- Poor treatment by clients and absence of an appeal/dispute resolution mechanism
- Contractual arrangements of workers mean they receive no additional financial benefits or protections beyond their pay
- Lack of formal worker associations and collective bargaining with either platforms or clients; no formal association who will negotiate on behalf of platform workers

Indeed, most platform workers experience decent work deficits. This is exacerbated by the lack or limited reach of regulations dealing with the operations of digital platform companies and the non-coverage of labour laws of platform workers in many countries.

In the recently-concluded Global Labour University Applied Alumni Research School (GLU-AARS) held on 31 March to 4 April 2019 at the Kassel University in Germany, a research group was organised to document and analyse organizing and collective action initiatives, whether initiated by trade unions or other worker organisations or workers themselves, that promote the rights of and accord protection to workers in the platform economy. Two GLU alumnae, Dr. Melisa R. Serrano, associate professor at the School of Labor and Industrial Relations of the University of the Philippines, and Dr. Edlira Xhafa, Coordinator of the GLU Online Academy, who have recently completed a research project commissioned by the International Labour Organization on “Representation Models and Collective Action of Workers in Informal Employment”, which includes workers in the platform economy, are coordinating this research group. The research group is comprised of 12 alumni of the GLU.

During the research group session on 2 April 2019, Dr. Serrano made a presentation about the nature of work and work organization in the digital/platform economy and some initiatives undertaken by trade unions, other worker organizations, and workers themselves in various countries on collective representation and action of workers in the platform economy. The objectives and methodology of the research project were also discussed during the research group session.

Research objectives

The general aim of the research is to explore possible patterns in the forms of collective action and representation of workers in the platform economy.

In doing so, the research will focus on initiatives in which workers in the platform economy have succeeded in organising collectively and/or in embarking in collective actions. The initiatives may be union-initiated, self-organised, and/or initiated by other labour organisations. Specifically, the research will:

1. Determine and analyse country-specific regulatory frameworks, if they exist, that deal with:
 - a. The operation of platform companies
 - b. The employment and working conditions of workers engaged by platforms
2. Identify and describe the most dominant types of platform-based work existing in a particular country;
3. Find out the general employment and working conditions of workers engaged by these platforms;
4. Identify and analyse the forms of collective representation and collective action in the specific initiative, including:
 - a. Underlying reasons and triggers
 - b. Strategies involved (and the factors that influenced the choice of strategies)

- c. Outcomes to date
 - d. Sustainability issues
5. Identify and analyse the constraining and facilitating factors that may have influenced the outcomes of the initiatives; and
 6. Recommend policies and strategies that aim at facilitating the representation and protection of workers in the platform economy.

The research objectives as laid down above will also be the suggested structure of the case study report.

Methodology

The case study method will primarily be used by the alumni who are participating in the research group. The case study may focus on a specific sector, platform, or group of workers. In gathering data for the case study, the alumni will use the following methods: (1) review and analysis of secondary literature, government data and records, organizational records, media articles, etc.; (2) interviews with key informants (e.g. government authorities, leaders of trade unions and other worker organizations, non-government organizations, officers of platform companies) and selected platform workers using an interview guide or a semi-structured questionnaire; (3) focus group discussions; and (4) field and/or participant observations.

The case studies and the project team

The project aims to generate at least 10 case studies. Twelve alumni will be involved in the project, including the research coordinator who will prepare the integrative report.

Table 1: The case studies and the project team

Country	Sector/Group of workers	Alumni researcher
Albania	Call center workers	Dr. Edlira Xhafa, Coordinator, GLU Online Academy
Indonesia	Grab drivers in Jakarta	Indah Budiarti, Communications Coordinator, Public Services International (PSI) Asia Pacific Office Nurus Mufidah, Enterprise Advisor, Better Work Indonesia
Kenya	Uber drivers	Jacqueline Wambui Wamai, Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational institutions and Hospital Workers (KUDHEIHA)
Nepal	Motorcycle drivers	Tilak Kalyan Khadka
Nigeria	Passenger and freight transportation (Uber and Kobo 360)	Muttaqa Yusha’u Abdulra’uf, Research Officer, Nigeria Labour Congress
Philippines	Grab drivers (members of Philippine Transportation Network Organization)	Vera Eileen Pupos, University Extension Specialist, School of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of the Philippines
Russia	Food delivery service (Yandex.Eats, DeliveryClab) and taxi service (Yandex.Taxy, Gett, Citimobil)	Svetlana Kolganova, Legal expert of the Seafarers’ Union of Russia and PhD student of the National Research University Higher School of Economics
All of the countries listed above	Integrative report	Dr. Melisa R. Serrano, Associate Professor, School of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of the Philippines

The project will propose that the results of the case studies will be discussed in a three-day workshop in Kassel in June 2021. The names of the alumni participants are listed in the table above.

Project duration

The research project will be implemented in 18 months. The project duration includes field work for the case study, writing the case study, and writing the synthesis or integrative report.