

The Politics of Gig Work in Times of COVID-19

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The Covid-19 global pandemic has laid bare both the precariousness and the plight of gig workers. For migrant platform workers, the coronavirus outbreak was particularly debilitating as they faced a higher risk of homelessness and poverty. While many people around the world practiced social distancing and self-isolation to curb the spread of Covid-19, gig workers remained at the forefront of exposure. Gig workers come into contact with many people every day, which increases the risk of infection for them and their customers. By the very nature of their work, social distancing and self-isolation are the opposite of what they do. For many gig workers, social distancing and self-isolation are luxuries that they cannot afford. Despite the danger they face, the companies they work for have not done enough to protect them in their precarious work. Platform companies such as Uber, Lyft, Deliveroo and many others, have strategically mislabeled gig workers as "independent contractors" to avoid offering them worker benefits. Some of these companies only provide meager payment for those infected with Covid-19 while ignoring those who stayed home with no income. Gig workers around the world have called on policymakers and governments to force platform companies to recognize them as workers. Although some governments have taken steps to this end, an industry-wide move has yet to happen. For now, the struggle for recognition as workers continues. Despite the difficulty in organizing against platform companies, workers and unions are increasingly making their voices heard about the injustice faced by platform workers.

Keywords: gig workers, platform workers, COVID-19, unions, platform companies

Introduction

The Covid-19 global pandemic has so far wreaked havoc on the global economy. As many companies are forced to shut their doors, workers face an increasing threat of unemployment. For example, with low passenger rates, airport staff were forced to take unpaid leave in Hong Kong (Frost, 2020). In South Africa, clothing stores such as Edgars and Jet may not reopen after the country emerges from a nation-wide lockdown (Kew, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has, to some extent, placed the global economy on hold while plunging many countries into recession. In the U.S. alone, 6.6 million Americans lost their jobs in one week as the coronavirus took its toll (Rushe, 2020). Around the world, governments have initiated coronavirus relief funds to assist those in need. However, millions of workers will not qualify for such relief as they have strategically been mislabeled as "independent contractors" by the companies they work for. This paper is mainly about those workers who are purposefully left out from worker benefits, and yet face the threat of Covid-19

on a daily, or even hourly basis. Although the paper discusses the working conditions of gig workers at large, it focuses more closely on platform workers for ride-hailing and food delivery platforms.

Amidst the outbreak, many cities around the world have been forced to shut down during the Covid-19 pandemic. People have been encouraged to self-isolate and to practice social distancing. However, for many platform workers, self-isolation and social distancing are almost impossible. Some drive door to door making deliveries (for example, UberEats and Deliveroo), while some open up their homes to complete strangers (for example, Airbnb). Although some platform companies have taken steps to reduce worker-customer contact, platform workers have remained highly exposed to the coronavirus. Lockdowns around the world have forced many people to rely on platform workers for food and grocery deliveries. Therefore, platform workers became a crucial lifeline during the coronavirus outbreak (Liu, 2020). Many were out and about during the outbreak delivering food, groceries, and transporting passengers. This means both workers and customers faced a higher risk of infection.

Despite the risk that platform workers face in the job, they are largely excluded from worker benefits. Platform companies have strategically mislabeled them as “independent contractors” to avoid offering them worker benefits (Dubal & Whittaker, 2020). Platform work does appear to have all the characteristics of an independent contractor. For example, workers choose when and where to work, giving them more flexibility. However, are they really their own bosses? According to a court in the UK, Uber drivers are not independent workers and should be paid a “national living wage” (Osborne, 2016). Shapiro (2020) also casts doubt upon the idea of “independent contractors,” arguing, for example, that platforms control what customers pay and how much workers should be paid in turn. Around the world, platform workers have taken to the streets calling on governments and policymakers to force platform companies to recognize them as workers (Noonan, 2020). Some jurisdictions have taken steps towards this end, although an industry-wide recognition of “independent contractors” as workers is yet to happen. For now, the deliveries will continue, and the risk of infection remains.

On the Frontlines of Covid-19

With many people avoiding both international and domestic travel, platform companies such as Uber and Lyft were negatively affected by the low demand for transportation services. Both companies reported significant losses due to the low demand for their ride-hailing services (Hawkins, 2020). While some workers for Uber and Lyft were forced to stay home as per government regulations, some were out in the cities working to earn an income. For those who chose their health and stayed home, Uber, Lyft, and many other platform companies did not offer any relief for them (Michener, 2020). As a result, many workers defaulted on their debt payments, rent, and other bills. To make matters worse in countries such as the U.S., a huge portion of platform workers are migrant workers (Dubal & Whittaker, 2020). For migrant workers, the Covid-19 pandemic laid bare many of their vulnerabilities. These include poor access to healthcare, food, and housing, to mention a few.

While the ride-hailing service saw a dramatic decline due to Covid-19, the opposite is true for food and grocery delivery services (Liu, 2020). With many people practicing social distancing or self-isolation, the demand for food and grocery deliveries saw a sharp increase in some places during the coronavirus pandemic. In Hong Kong, Deliveroo reported a 100 percent increase in demand in February 2020. In China, food delivery platforms Baemin and Yogiyo both reported

increases of 9 percent and 11 percent, respectively (Matthias, 2020). Companies such as Grubhub, Amazon, UberEats, and DoorDash all reported a drastic increase in the demand for their services. As a result, these companies also indicated the need to bring in a new workforce to meet increasing demand (Liu, 2020). To curb the spread of the coronavirus, some of these companies attempted to reduce worker-customer contact. For example, Shipt, a grocery delivery service, made it possible for workers to drop off groceries at the door allowing no contact with customers (Genovese, 2020). Despite these attempts by platform companies to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, many platform workers felt that these attempts were not enough. Millions of platform workers were left abandoned by the companies they work for during the Covid-19 pandemic (Chaibi, 2020).



Image taken by the author.

Response by Platform Companies

The response by platform companies to the crisis has been very uneven. Uber announced that it will provide compensation for drivers diagnosed with COVID-19 and placed under quarantine. Bolt, a ride-hailing platform from Estonia, announced that it will only provide compensation for its drivers based in the U.K. (Braun et al., 2020). Deliveroo announced that it will exceptionally offer paid sick leave for its drivers based in Belgium to those who self-isolate and those who fall ill. These are just a few examples of the mixed reaction by platform companies as far as compensation is concerned. Platform companies also had different reactions regarding the protection of workers. For example, workers for Deliveroo and Shipt reported that these companies did not provide them with any personal protective equipment such as gloves, masks, wipes, or gels (Chaibi, 2020). Workers had to purchase these items on their own. Shipt workers also demanded hazard pay from the company since shopping had become a risky job. However, their demands fell on deaf ears.

At the policy level, there is also an unwillingness by platform companies to recognize their “independent contractors” as workers (Dubal & Whittaker, 2020). Doing so would force platform companies to offer more benefits to workers which would put a dent in their profits. These companies, therefore, profit from mislabeling workers. In addition to mislabeling, Shapiro (2020) argues that platform companies profit by generating what he calls calculative asymmetries. For Shapiro (2020), platform companies hoard calculative power and set the working conditions for workers with technologies such as algorithms. Therefore, mislabeling works hand-in-hand with calculation to generate asymmetries between workers and platforms.

It can be said, therefore, that what we are witnessing is—to borrow David Harvey’s words—“accumulation by mislabeling” or “accumulation by misclassifying.” Harvey’s theory of accumulation by dispossession explains how profits come to be concentrated in the hands of a few by dispossessing others of their land, resources, and the very thing that sustains their livelihoods (Harvey, 2001). In the case of platform workers, their status or label is an important factor in their relation to their employees as far as benefits are concerned. Therefore, it is in the interest of platform companies to maintain the label of “independent contractor.” According to Shapiro (2020), platform companies exert control over labor while maintaining the impression of autonomy for the worker. This label has particularly been problematic during the Covid-19 pandemic for those “independent contractors” who work full time for platform companies.

The Pushback

Some of these workers are forming alliances to take on the platform industry and to push the government to enact policies that would recognize them as workers. An example of such an alliance is Rideshare Drivers United, which is an organization formed by Uber and Lyft drivers. On their website (<https://drivers-united.org/>), the organization points out that a hallmark of the platform industry is that workers are isolated, making it difficult to unite. During the coronavirus pandemic, Rideshare Drivers United circulated a petition in which drivers demanded coronavirus relief from the companies they work for. They point out that drivers who continued to work during the pandemic saw a drop of 80 percent in their income while risking exposure to COVID-19. On the petition, they call on city and state legislators to offer a temporary basic income, an extension of sick leave to at least four weeks, and a statewide moratorium until the end of the pandemic. From Uber and Lyft, the organization has a long list of demands, including creating a driver relief fund and policy changes that would improve their status as workers. The petition then ends by stating that failure to meet these demands would cause many drivers to face homelessness, starvation, and other deprivation of human rights.

Unions have also attempted to support platform workers in their struggle against platform companies and governments. For example, FIRST Union in New Zealand has called on the government to offer statutory paid leave for platform workers during the coronavirus outbreak (Matthias, 2020). In Italy, a union called Riders Union Bologna, which represents couriers, is calling for a quarantine income from the state. The union states that platform workers, who are considered “self-employed” or “entrepreneurs,” often fall outside the social safety net (Braun et al., 2020). There is reason to believe that platform companies are here to stay, especially in manufacturing and shipping (Liu, 2020). Therefore, the struggle between platform workers and platform companies will continue if worker demands are not met.

Conclusion

This article discussed the condition of platform workers during the global outbreak of the coronavirus. Using newspaper articles as the primary source of reference, the article aimed to highlight the power struggle between platform workers and platform companies. These workers, who are strategically referred to as “independent contractors,” were largely left to fend for themselves as the coronavirus made its way around the world. While many cities went under lockdown, with some people choosing to stay home for safety, many platform workers were out and about doing their jobs while risking infection for both themselves and their customers. This was particularly the case for workers on food and grocery delivery platforms. For workers on ride-hailing platforms, the impact of Covid-19 was also felt in their pockets. Many drivers had to stay home with no income due to the low demand for transportation services. For some drivers, staying home was not an option. Self-isolation and social distancing were for them a luxury they could not afford. To make matters worse in some countries is that the workforce in the platform industry is also the most vulnerable. In the U.S., for example, a significant part of the workforce is made up of migrants. The combined risk of poverty, homelessness, and infection from Covid-19 was, therefore, more severe for migrant platform workers.

Governments, unions, advocacy groups, and platform workers themselves all have a role to play to bring about change. For governments, one such task is to enact policies that protect the labor rights of employees from exploitation by platform companies. Unions, advocacy groups, and platform workers must form stronger alliances to force platform companies to recognize them as workers. Although mindful of the fact that some platform workers earn a second income on platforms, labeling those workers working full time as “independent contractors” must be challenged. Failure to do so will perpetuate what was earlier referred to as “accumulation by mislabeling.”

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