

Platform Precarity And Digital Labor Erosion

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Abstract

The proliferation of platform-based work has fundamentally restructured contemporary labor markets, introducing new forms of economic precarity that challenge traditional employment protections. This paper examines the lived experiences of gig workers operating within app-based platforms, analyzing how algorithmic management, misclassification practices, and the erosion of labor rights create systemic vulnerabilities. Drawing on recent sociological literature and empirical studies from multiple geographic contexts, this research investigates the mechanisms through which platform capitalism perpetuates precarity while obscuring traditional employer-employee relationships. The analysis reveals that platform workers face irregular income streams, inadequate social protections, and algorithmic control systems that diminish worker autonomy while maximizing platform profitability. Findings indicate that these precarious conditions disproportionately affect marginalized populations, including migrants, women, and economically disadvantaged workers. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of platform labor for labor policy, collective organizing, and the future of work in digitally mediated economies.

Keywords:- Platform Economy, Gig Work, Precarity, Algorithmic Management, Labor Rights, Digital Labor

Introduction

The emergence of platform capitalism has fundamentally transformed labor relations in the 21st century, giving rise to what scholars increasingly characterize as a new regime of economic precarity (Schor et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2025). Digital platforms such as Uber, DoorDash, TaskRabbit, and similar intermediaries have created employment arrangements that blur traditional boundaries between entrepreneurship and wage labor, while systematically eroding the protections historically associated with employee status. These platforms operate through algorithmic management systems that coordinate millions of workers across geographic boundaries, promising flexibility and autonomy while often delivering economic insecurity and diminished worker power (Wang, 2024).

Recent empirical evidence suggests that platform work has expanded dramatically over the past decade. In the United States, estimates indicate that between 16% and 36% of adults have participated in platform-based earning activities, with a significant subset dependent on this work as their primary income source (Guo et al., 2025). This expansion has occurred alongside sustained debate regarding the classification of platform workers as independent contractors rather than employees, a distinction with profound implications for access to minimum wage protections, overtime pay, health insurance, unemployment benefits, and collective bargaining rights.

This paper investigates the lived experiences of gig workers within platform-mediated labor markets, with particular attention to how structural arrangements produce and perpetuate precarity. The research question guiding this analysis is: How do platform-based employment structures and algorithmic management practices shape the economic security, working conditions, and subjective experiences of gig workers? Through systematic analysis of recent sociological literature, this study examines the mechanisms through which platform capitalism generates precarious labor conditions while simultaneously obscuring traditional employer-employee relationships that might trigger legal protections.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond academic interest. As platform work becomes increasingly normalized across diverse economic sectors, understanding its implications for labor rights and worker wellbeing becomes essential for policymakers, labor organizers, and workers themselves. The findings presented here contribute to ongoing debates about labor classification, the adequacy of existing regulatory frameworks, and the future trajectory of work in digitally mediated economies.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Platform Capitalism and Labor Process Theory

Platform capitalism represents a distinctive organizational form within contemporary capitalism, characterized by the intermediation of economic exchanges through digital platforms that extract value while avoiding traditional employment responsibilities (Srniczek, 2017). These platforms leverage network effects, data accumulation, and algorithmic coordination to create monopolistic or oligopolistic market positions, fundamentally restructuring how work is organized, compensated, and controlled (Faraoun, 2024).

Labor Process Theory (LPT) provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding platform work dynamics. Originally developed to analyze factory production, LPT examines how management extracts surplus value from labor through control mechanisms that simultaneously deskill workers and intensify their effort (Braverman, 1974). Contemporary scholars have extended LPT to platform contexts, arguing that algorithmic management represents a form of digital Taylorism that fragments tasks, monitors performance with unprecedented granularity, and disciplines workers through ratings, incentive structures, and threat of deactivation (Wood et al., 2019; Wang, 2024).

However, platform labor also exhibits distinctive characteristics that complicate straightforward application of traditional LPT. Unlike factory workers who clearly occupy employee status, platform workers are typically classified as independent contractors, creating what Faraoun (2024) describes as a legal fiction that obscures substantive employment relationships. This misclassification enables platforms to externalize costs associated with employment while retaining significant control over how work is performed, blurring boundaries between autonomy and subordination in ways that challenge conventional labor categories.

Precarity and Economic Insecurity

The concept of precarity has emerged as central to understanding contemporary labor conditions. Standing (2011) theorized the precariat as a new class characterized by insecure employment, lack of occupational identity, and absence of social protections traditionally associated with stable work. Platform workers exemplify many dimensions of precarity: they face irregular and unpredictable income, lack access to employer-provided benefits, experience high degrees of job insecurity due to algorithmic deactivation, and often work long hours with minimal rest (Schor et al., 2020; Pankaj & Jha, 2024).

Recent longitudinal research has documented significant mental health consequences associated with platform work dependency. Guo et al. (2025) found that workers who depend on platform income as their primary earning source experience elevated levels of mental distress mediated through financial precarity and social isolation. The study revealed that irregular income patterns and lack of predictable work schedules contribute to chronic stress, anxiety, and diminished life satisfaction among platform-dependent workers.

Glavin and Schieman (2022) similarly documented that platform dependency correlates with reduced subjective wellbeing, even when controlling for total earnings. This suggests that precarity operates through multiple dimensions beyond simple income level, encompassing aspects of schedule control, autonomy, and security. Workers experience the anxiety of unpredictable demand, the pressure to remain continuously available for potential work, and the fear of arbitrary deactivation without due process or appeal mechanisms.

Algorithmic Management and Control

Algorithmic management has emerged as a defining characteristic of platform work, representing a system through which platforms coordinate labor without traditional hierarchical supervision. These systems operate through interconnected mechanisms: matching algorithms assign tasks to workers; pricing algorithms

determine compensation; rating systems monitor performance; and automated enforcement systems impose disciplinary measures including deactivation (Wood et al., 2019; Griesbach et al., 2019).

The opacity of algorithmic systems creates profound information asymmetries between platforms and workers. Workers typically lack knowledge about how algorithms make decisions regarding task allocation, surge pricing, performance evaluation, or account deactivation (Carnegie Endowment, 2024). This informational asymmetry undermines workers' ability to strategically manage their work, contest unfair decisions, or collectively organize around shared grievances. As Ray (2024) documents in the context of Indian platform drivers, algorithmic opacity generates chronic uncertainty and distrust, compelling workers to self-discipline through extended hours and acceptance of unfavorable tasks in hopes of maintaining algorithmic favorability.

Moreover, algorithmic control extends beyond formal work time, shaping workers' entire temporal orientation. The gamification of platform work through badges, bonuses, and streak incentives encourages workers to remain continuously available, blurring boundaries between work and non-work time (Schor et al., 2024). Rating systems that aggregate customer feedback into numerical scores create constant performance pressure, with workers experiencing ratings as a form of digital surveillance that extends the customer's disciplinary gaze into every aspect of service delivery.

Differential Experiences and Intersectionality

Platform precarity operates unevenly across social categories, with marginalized populations experiencing intensified vulnerabilities. Gender research reveals that women platform workers encounter specific challenges including lower average earnings, occupational segregation into lower-paying platform sectors, increased harassment risks, and difficulties balancing platform work with care responsibilities (Gerber, 2022; Milkman et al., 2021). The flexibility promised by platform work often translates into a burden for women who absorb the costs of scheduling unpredictability while managing household labor.

Migration status significantly shapes platform work experiences. Recent research emphasizes that migrants often turn to platform work due to barriers accessing formal employment, language limitations, or immigration status constraints (Kowalik et al., 2024; Van Doorn et al., 2023). For these workers, platform work represents both opportunity and exploitation: it provides income earning possibilities that might otherwise be unavailable, while simultaneously exposing them to precarious conditions without the legal protections available to documented workers in formal employment.

In the Global South, platform precarity intersects with broader patterns of informal employment and digitally organized informality. Ray (2024) demonstrates how platform work in Indian cities reproduces historical patterns of informal labor while introducing new forms of algorithmic control. During the COVID-19 pandemic, platform workers in cities like Kolkata and Ranchi faced displacement from both platforms and cities, relying on informal rural-urban networks for survival support while platforms abdicated any responsibility for worker wellbeing.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review methodology, synthesizing findings from recent empirical research on platform work and precarity published between 2020 and 2025. The review encompasses peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, and policy reports that examine gig worker experiences, platform labor conditions, and the implications of platform capitalism for employment relations.

The selection criteria prioritized studies that:

- Focused on app-based platform work across diverse sectors including rideshare, delivery, freelancing, and task-based services;
- Provided empirical evidence regarding worker experiences, working conditions, or labor market outcomes;
- Analyzed structural dimensions of platform work including algorithmic management, classification issues, or regulatory frameworks;
- Were published in peer-reviewed sociology, labor studies, or related social science outlets.

The geographic scope encompasses studies from multiple regions including North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, recognizing that platform capitalism operates globally while manifesting differently across distinct regulatory, economic, and cultural contexts. This international perspective enables identification of common patterns while remaining attentive to context-specific variations.

Analysis proceeded through several stages. First, identified studies were systematically reviewed to extract key findings regarding worker experiences, working conditions, income security, health outcomes, and organizational strategies. Second, thematic coding identified recurring patterns across studies related to precarity

dimensions, algorithmic control mechanisms, classification disputes, and worker responses. Third, synthesizing analysis integrated findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of how platform structures generate and perpetuate precarious labor conditions.

The limitations of this methodology must be acknowledged. As a literature review rather than original empirical research, this study's findings are constrained by the availability and quality of existing research. The rapidly evolving nature of platform work means that some developments may not yet be captured in peer-reviewed literature. Additionally, publication bias may mean that certain aspects of platform work, certain geographic regions, or certain worker populations are underrepresented in available research.

Findings

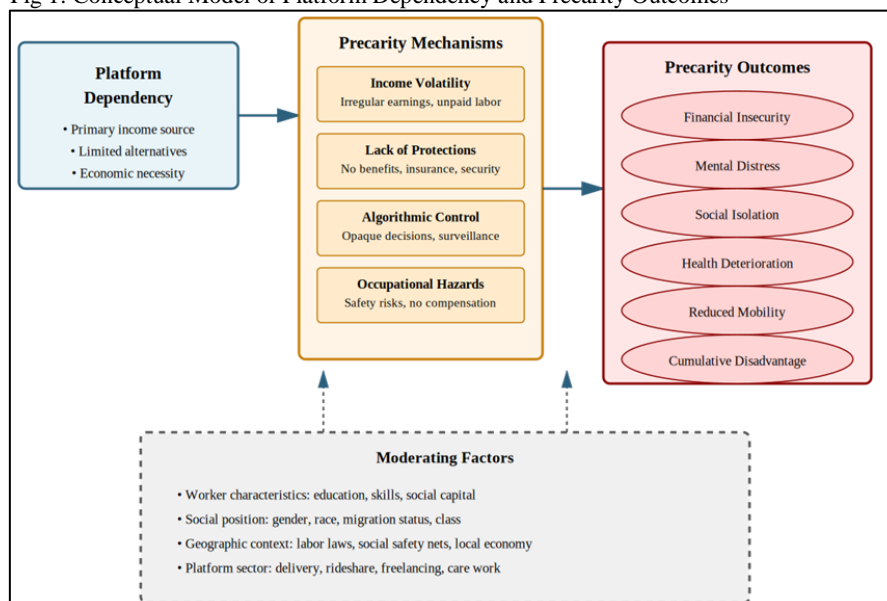
Income Precarity and Economic Insecurity

Platform workers consistently report irregular and insufficient earnings that fail to provide economic security. Multiple studies document that after accounting for expenses including vehicle maintenance, fuel, insurance, and equipment costs, many platform workers earn below minimum wage on an hourly basis. Research analyzing Seattle rideshare drivers found average earnings of \$9.73 per hour after expenses, substantially below the city's minimum wage (Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, 2019). More recent analyses suggest that compensation structures have deteriorated further as platforms have reduced per-task payments while simultaneously increasing commission rates charged to workers.

The Worker Info Exchange (2024) estimated that data held by ridehailing and delivery platforms in London masks approximately £1.9 billion in unpaid wages, representing time spent waiting between tasks, driving to pickup locations, and managing platform-related activities that platforms do not compensate. This wage theft operates systematically through platform design choices that define compensable time narrowly while requiring workers to absorb uncompensated labor time. Income volatility compounds low average earnings. Platform workers experience significant day-to-day and week-to-week variation in earnings depending on demand fluctuations, weather conditions, competition from other workers, and algorithmic allocation decisions. This unpredictability undermines financial planning and generates chronic stress. Workers must continuously calculate whether accepting available work will generate sufficient income to justify costs, while facing pressure to accept marginal tasks to maintain algorithmic standing or achieve bonus thresholds.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship between platform dependency and economic outcomes mediated through various precarity dimensions. Workers who depend on platform income as their primary source face cascading vulnerabilities including income volatility, lack of benefits, occupational hazards, and limited alternative employment options. These factors interact to produce cumulative disadvantage that extends beyond immediate economic measures to affect mental health, family relationships, and long-term economic mobility.

Fig 1: Conceptual Model of Platform Dependency and Precarity Outcomes



Source: Synthesized from Guo et al.(2025), Schor et al.(2020,2024), and Glavin & Schieman(2022)

Absence of Employment Protections

The classification of platform workers as independent contractors systematically excludes them from employment protections available to traditional employees. This exclusion operates across multiple dimensions with profound consequences for worker security and wellbeing. Workers lack access to minimum wage guarantees, meaning they can work for extended periods earning below subsistence levels with no legal recourse. They receive no overtime compensation despite frequently working far beyond standard 40-hour weeks to generate adequate income.

Health insurance represents a critical gap. In the United States, where health coverage is typically employer-provided, platform workers must purchase insurance individually at significantly higher costs or go uninsured, facing catastrophic financial risk from health emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly illustrated these vulnerabilities as platform workers continued working while sick due to lack of paid sick leave, becoming vectors for disease transmission while simultaneously facing health risks themselves.

Workers lack unemployment insurance eligibility, meaning that when demand drops or when platforms deactivate their accounts, they have no safety net. They receive no workers' compensation for occupational injuries despite platform work involving significant physical risks including traffic accidents for drivers and assault for service providers entering customers' homes. They have no protection against arbitrary termination, as platforms can deactivate accounts without notice, explanation, or appeal process.

Table 1 presents a comparative overview of employment protections available to traditional employees versus platform workers classified as independent contractors across key dimensions including compensation, benefits, and workplace rights. The table demonstrates the systematic pattern of protection erosion that characterizes platform employment arrangements.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Employment Protections: Traditional Employees vs. Platform Workers

Protection/Benefit	Traditional Employees	Platform Workers
Minimum Wage	Guaranteed	Not guaranteed
Overtime Pay	1.5x after 40 hours	None
Health Insurance	Employer-provided	Self-purchased
Unemployment Insurance	Eligible	Ineligible
Workers' Compensation	Covered	Not covered
Collective Bargaining	Protected right	Generally excluded
Termination Protection	Notice required; legal recourse	At-will deactivation

Algorithmic Control and Worker Autonomy

While platforms rhetorically emphasize worker autonomy and flexibility, empirical evidence reveals sophisticated control systems that significantly constrain worker decision-making. Algorithmic management operates as a distributed control system that shapes worker behavior without requiring direct human supervision. Through interconnected mechanisms including task allocation algorithms, dynamic pricing, rating systems, and gamification features, platforms achieve levels of behavioral control that rival or exceed traditional employment relationships.

Task allocation algorithms determine which workers receive which opportunities, creating dependencies that undermine worker autonomy. Workers report that accepting tasks maintains algorithmic favorability, while declining tasks risks reduced future access. This dynamic compels workers to accept marginal or unprofitable tasks to preserve their standing within opaque algorithmic systems. Carnegie Endowment research (2024) on Southeast Asian drivers documented how workers rush through traffic, skip meals, and work while ill in attempts to achieve bonus thresholds or maintain high acceptance rates they believe influence future task allocation.

Rating systems create pervasive surveillance that extends customer evaluation into continuous performance monitoring. Workers experience ratings anxiety, knowing that a few negative reviews from difficult customers can result in deactivation regardless of overall performance quality. This system transfers quality control responsibility to customers while insulating platforms from accountability, creating power asymmetries in which workers must accommodate unreasonable customer demands to preserve their ratings.

The gamification of platform work through badges, streaks, challenges, and bonus structures manipulates psychological reward systems to encourage extended work hours. These features transform work into game-like activities that obscure exploitation through entertainment mechanics. Schor et al. (2024) found that gamification particularly affects workers experiencing platform dependency, as their economic necessity interacts with psychological manipulation to produce self-exploitation that platforms cultivate but do not formally require.

Health and Safety Risks

Platform work involves significant occupational health and safety hazards that platforms systematically externalize onto workers. For transportation and delivery workers, traffic accidents represent the most severe risk. Platform workers experience elevated accident rates compared to traditional taxi drivers, attributable to time pressure from piece-rate compensation, fatigue from extended working hours, and incentive structures that encourage risky driving behavior to complete more trips.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, delivery workers in Turkey lost over 160 lives, highlighting occupational health vulnerabilities that platforms refuse to acknowledge (Özbilgin et al., 2024). Platform workers continued working throughout the pandemic with minimal protective equipment, limited access to sanitization facilities, and no paid sick leave. The essential status of platform work during lockdowns made visible its contradiction: platform workers provided services deemed essential to public welfare while being denied the employment protections and benefits extended to other essential workers.

Beyond acute hazards, platform work involves chronic physical and mental health impacts. The sedentary nature of some platform work combined with extended hours produces musculoskeletal disorders. The stress of income volatility, rating anxiety, and algorithmic uncertainty contributes to elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and burnout. Guo et al. (2025) documented that platform-dependent workers exhibit significantly higher levels of psychological distress compared to both traditionally employed workers and those engaging in platform work as supplemental income.

Worker Resistance and Collective Action

Despite structural barriers to collective organizing, platform workers have developed innovative strategies for resistance and mutual support. Traditional union organizing faces obstacles including worker atomization, independent contractor classification that excludes workers from collective bargaining protections, high turnover rates, and platform opposition. Nevertheless, workers have organized protests, work stoppages, and mutual aid networks that challenge platform power.

Strikes and collective actions have proliferated globally. In 2024, rideshare drivers in Ghana, India, Kenya, and the United Kingdom conducted coordinated strikes demanding transparent earnings, reduced commission rates, and improved safety protections. These actions demonstrate worker capacity for collective mobilization despite geographic dispersion and lack of formal workplace. Social media and messaging applications have become crucial organizing tools, enabling workers to coordinate actions, share information about platform policies, and build solidarity across geographic boundaries.

Worker-led organizations have emerged to advocate for policy changes and provide mutual support. Organizations such as the App-Based Drivers Association, the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain, and various regional gig worker collectives have successfully lobbied for regulatory reforms, filed class-action lawsuits challenging misclassification, and provided legal assistance to individual workers facing deactivation or payment disputes.

Some jurisdictions have responded to worker organizing with legislative reforms. Spain's Rider Law reclassified delivery workers as employees entitled to full employment protections. New York City implemented minimum earnings guarantees for rideshare drivers. California's Assembly Bill 5 attempted comprehensive reclassification before being partially rolled back through Proposition 22. These regulatory developments reflect ongoing contestation over platform work's legal status and suggest that worker mobilization can influence policy outcomes.

Discussion

The findings synthesized above reveal platform-based work as a systemic reconfiguration of employment relations that produces precarity through interconnected mechanisms operating at technological, organizational, legal, and ideological levels. Platform capitalism represents not simply technological innovation but rather a deliberate organizational strategy designed to extract value from labor while avoiding employment responsibilities. Understanding this requires moving beyond technological determinism to examine how platforms deploy technology within broader capitalist imperatives of cost minimization, labor discipline, and profit maximization.

Theoretical Implications

Platform work challenges traditional labor sociology frameworks while simultaneously demonstrating their continued relevance. Labor Process Theory provides valuable insights into how platforms achieve control without formal employment relationships, revealing algorithmic management as contemporary manifestation of longstanding capitalist imperatives to intensify labor while reducing worker power. However, LPT developed within factory contexts and requires adaptation to understand dispersed, digitally mediated work that operates without physical workplaces or direct supervision.

The concept of precarity proves essential for understanding platform work's subjective dimensions. Workers experience precarity not merely as income insecurity but as existential uncertainty permeating multiple life domains. Algorithmic opacity produces chronic interpretive labor as workers attempt to discern how systems evaluate their performance, what factors influence task allocation, and whether behaviors will result in reward or punishment. This uncertainty extends beyond work itself to affect financial planning, family relationships, and long-term life trajectories.

Platform work also illuminates intersections between employment relations and broader structures of inequality. The concentration of marginalized workers in platform sectors reflects not neutral market dynamics but structural barriers that channel vulnerable populations into precarious work. Platforms exploit pre-existing vulnerabilities associated with migration status, gender, race, and class position, while their misclassification strategies further disadvantage these already vulnerable populations by denying access to protections that might ameliorate disadvantage.

Policy Implications

The evidence reviewed suggests that existing regulatory frameworks prove inadequate for addressing platform work's distinctive characteristics. Binary classifications that distinguish employees from independent contractors fail to capture platform work's hybrid nature, in which workers experience significant platform control while lacking employment protections. Several policy approaches merit consideration for addressing these inadequacies.

First, reclassifying platform workers as employees would extend traditional protections including minimum wage, overtime, benefits, and collective bargaining rights. This approach has been adopted in Spain and advocated by labor organizations globally. However, implementation faces resistance from platforms threatening to exit jurisdictions, reduce worker availability, or raise consumer prices. Moreover, some workers value scheduling flexibility and fear that employee status would reduce this flexibility, suggesting that regulatory approaches must balance protection with autonomy.

Second, creating intermediate classifications that extend some protections while preserving flexibility represents another approach. Canada's dependent contractor status provides a model, granting workers collective bargaining rights and termination protections while maintaining their independent status for other purposes. This approach recognizes that not all workers fit neatly into binary categories while rejecting the premise that ambiguity should default to exclusion from protections.

Third, portable benefits systems that attach benefits to workers rather than employers could address protection gaps without requiring reclassification. Under such systems, platforms would contribute to funds that workers could access for health insurance, retirement savings, or unemployment support regardless of which platform they work for. This approach addresses the multi-platform nature of much gig work while creating social safety nets appropriate for contingent employment.

Fourth, algorithmic transparency requirements could address information asymmetries that undermine worker agency. Regulations could mandate that platforms disclose how algorithms make decisions regarding task allocation, pricing, performance evaluation, and deactivation. The European Union's Platform Work Directive includes such provisions, requiring platforms to explain algorithmic decision-making and provide human oversight for consequential decisions. While transparency alone cannot eliminate power asymmetries, it could enable workers to make more informed decisions and collectively challenge unfair practices.

Future Research Directions

Several research gaps warrant attention. Longitudinal studies examining how platform work affects long-term economic trajectories, skill development, and career progression remain limited. Most existing research employs cross-sectional designs that capture conditions at single time points but cannot assess whether platform work serves as transitional stepping stone to stable employment or represents dead-end trajectory into chronic precarity.

Geographic variation in platform work experiences deserves deeper investigation. While scholarship increasingly incorporates Global South contexts, understanding remains limited regarding how platform capitalism intersects with informal employment, migration patterns, and development trajectories in these regions. Comparative research examining how different regulatory regimes affect worker outcomes could inform policy debates about optimal approaches to platform work regulation.

Worker organizing strategies and their effectiveness require systematic analysis. Case studies document specific organizing successes, but comprehensive understanding of which strategies work under which conditions remains underdeveloped. Research examining how digital technologies enable both platform control and worker resistance could illuminate possibilities for collective action in digitally mediated labor markets.

Finally, research examining alternatives to extractive platform capitalism could contribute to envisioning different futures for digital labor. Platform cooperatives, municipal platforms, and other models that distribute ownership and governance more equitably offer potential alternatives that preserve technological coordination benefits while addressing exploitation concerns. Systematic evaluation of these alternatives' viability and scaling potential could inform debates about whether platform capitalism's harms are inevitable or whether alternative organizational forms could deliver coordination benefits without precarity costs.

Conclusion

Platform-based work represents a fundamental restructuring of employment relations that systematically produces precarity while obscuring traditional employer-employee relationships. Through misclassification strategies, algorithmic control mechanisms, and externalization of employment costs, platforms extract value from labor while denying workers the protections historically associated with employment. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that platform workers experience irregular income, lack access to benefits and protections, face significant health and safety risks, and operate within opaque algorithmic systems that constrain autonomy while demanding continuous availability.

These precarious conditions distribute unevenly across social categories, with marginalized populations including migrants, women, and economically disadvantaged workers experiencing intensified vulnerabilities. Platform capitalism does not create inequality anew but rather exploits and deepens pre-existing structures of disadvantage, channeling vulnerable workers into precarious arrangements while denying them protections that might ameliorate vulnerability. Worker resistance demonstrates that platform power, while substantial, is not absolute. Through strikes, organizing, and policy advocacy, workers have contested platform practices and achieved some regulatory reforms. However, these victories remain partial and contested, with platforms deploying significant resources to maintain favorable regulatory environments and resist worker demands for improved conditions.

The trajectory of platform work remains uncertain and contested. Whether platform capitalism represents a transitional phase toward comprehensive regulatory reform, a new permanent mode of precarious employment, or an experiment that will be superseded by alternative organizational forms depends on ongoing political struggles between platforms, workers, and regulatory authorities. What remains clear is that current arrangements prove inadequate for ensuring worker security and wellbeing, necessitating continued scholarly attention, policy innovation, and worker organizing to address the challenges platform capitalism poses for employment relations in the digital age.

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