

Think what's going on in the gig economy has nothing to do with you? Think again

Unthinkable: More and more of us are working for algorithms – and losing some of our rights in the process, says UCD researcher Dr Lorenzo Cini

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How would you feel about working for an algorithm? Some of us already do – at least partially. Journalists these days are schooled not only in fact-checking but also in “search-engine optimisation”, or making stories visible on your favourite app.

What's more, companies are increasingly using data analytics for hiring and firing decisions. Which suggests that, if you really want to get ahead, don't try to impress your manager, just suck up to the performance-measurement tool.

For a rising number of workers this is already a reality. There are an estimated 28 million “platform workers” across the EU who are formally self-employed but are governed by technology. These include taxi drivers who may once have worked for a firm but now report to an app, and food-delivery couriers who likewise have no human manager, nor any of the labour rights that would be afforded to the employees of a company.

Many other fields of labour are ripe for takeover by a Deliveroo or an Uber. It is not entirely fanciful to imagine journalists one day working for social media and getting micropayments for reader clicks, while also bearing individual responsibility for legal actions and other liabilities.

So if you think what's going on in the “gig economy” has nothing to do with you, then think again.

Last week EU labour ministers [agreed to develop a common position](#) to protect digital platform workers from exploitation, although there are concerns that the proposals will be watered down by intensive lobbying from big tech. A key issue is whether a “presumption of employment” will be applied to platforms, putting the burden of proof on host companies to justify the denial of labour rights, Dr Lorenzo Cini, a researcher at University College Dublin explains.

“Platforms claim to operate only as a database via which supply and demand are matched. They are therefore able to maintain tight control over their users, while

presenting these workers as self-employed, with no formal dependence relation and, therefore, also without the protections of health and safety, rights to various kinds of paid leave, and rights to employers' contributions to pensions and social insurance."

Cini, who is organising a conference on "governance by numbers" in Dublin next week, has examined the growth of the gig economy from the ground up. In Dublin he conducted interviews with food delivery couriers, identifying not only forms of exploitation but also management inefficiencies.

Ironically some of the couriers were happier to have an algorithm boss because their interaction with the physical boss was not always positive. However, Cini says, the absence of a human supervisor meant it was difficult to raise grievances or workplace issues. "A big issue in Dublin was safety on the streets. So many of these couriers did not want to go to certain areas where there were youngsters' attacks during the Covid lockdown. The algorithm didn't know about these issues."

It took a series of demonstrations by couriers to make the company understand why they were refusing some orders. Cini describes this as a weakness of platforms from a capitalist management perspective. Platforms "cannot easily tackle worker dissatisfaction".

His main concern is not company efficiency, however, but rather denial of worker rights. A particular worry in Dublin at present is the subletting of courier delivery accounts to undocumented migrants. This results in a "completely invisible and very weak workforce, not able or willing to mobilise because they can't complain about conditions", he says.

The emergence of the gig economy calls for "new methods" of organising workers because unionisation does not seem effective, Cini says.

"Most of these workers are migrant – a big chunk even undocumented – employed without any formal or 'standard' employment relation. When trade unionists of the hosting country approach them to ask to become members of their unions, understandably these workers appear very diffident, if not hostile. Who is this usually white male asking me to pay €50 for a membership card for an organisation of which I don't know any utility?"

"What is more, many undocumented riders I interviewed in Dublin were even afraid of trade unions because they believed that with the unions' intervention – and their aim to regularise the gig economy – they may lose their job as couriers, which for them is at the moment the only source of survival. Having said that, I am not arguing that the solution is to leave the things as they are now. Quite the opposite: I believe that this sector can be organised only if traditional unions choose to exit their comfort zone and try to explore new methods of campaigning."

In his research, Cini – who is originally from Florence, in Italy, and takes up a lecturing post at University College Cork after the summer – refers to Karl Marx’s concept of class consciousness, an awareness that emerges within a group of workers of their own exploitation.

What would Marx make of the gig economy?

“He would organise gig economy workers against platform capital and fight the algorithmic management back.”

There was nothing inevitable about this, Cini says, stressing the German philosopher never believed a classless society would evolve spontaneously.

“Today there are some commentators exhibiting a naive post-Marxist approach who believe that thanks to technological innovation we will supersede capitalism.

“They argue that the development of technology will free us from the need to work and this will lead us to a society of the abundance where everyone may be able to live pursuing her talents and hobbies.” However, says Cini, “There is no way out from capitalism without conflict and class struggle.”

Why? “Because technology itself is not neutral ... Technology is embedded in the power relations of a specific society. So if there is a specific power relation at a certain point of time in society that will also inform the way innovations are invented.”

For instance, online platforms are being designed “to expose workers to unpaid labour time”. In the case of food couriers, they don’t get paid while waiting between deliveries even though they are logged on to the benefit of the platform.

“The rate of unionisation worldwide is in decline. The organisational capacity of workers is in decline as well. So why should the future be bright for workers? It seems like a story for children, not like reality,” says Cini.

Utopian views of the future of work, he says, “assume that labour is, in the end, not an essential component of our society”. In truth technology “masks” the role of labour – computers increase productivity while humans buttress the system often through unpaid or poorly paid work.

“Labour power is central. It won’t be marginalised. It is still the source of organisation for capitalist production, and this, I think, is a key issue that should be put at the centre of all these discussions on innovation and platform technology.”

Lorenzo Cini will be joined by a range of international speakers at the [Governance by Numbers and its Discontents](#) conference, at UCD Quinn School of Business, Dublin, Thursday, June 29th, to Saturday, July 1st