Initiatives to Protect Nonstandard Workers

Beyond Jobs

WHITE PAPER

Since the 2010's blue collar work has become increasingly platform mediated. Systemic undermining of workers by thousands of employee scheduling systems and gig work apps has prompted diverse regulatory responses and other attempts to mitigate the harm. This page categorizes those efforts with examples. It explores why these initiatives struggle.

Contents

BACKGROUND: The Rise of Labor Platforms

Gig work apps (Doordash, Rover, TaskRabbit, Uber) make headlines. But employee scheduling firms that run monopsony labor markets for their corporate customers (Kronos UKG, Workday, Infor, ATOSS, Dayforce, ZIP) are probably more impactful. All platforms are shaped around their operator's priorities; minimizing labor costs, and worker responsiveness, are universal aims.

In the 1990's Kronos Inc., a manufacturer of workplace timeclocks began developing scheduling software for its clients. Dominance of the sector they pioneered was enshrined when their Workforce Central 8 (released 2015) became a category bestseller. WC8 has been marketed to finance directors with slogans like "*Manage your workforce without limits*".

Scheduling software is a growing and profitable sector. It is hard to know how any organization's system is configured, but a supermarket manager's rule to "*keep staffing costs at my specified percentage of turnover through the checkouts each hour*" is a plausible example. AI is supercharging the one-sided efficiencies and data of these already powerful technologies.

As breadwinners increasingly transitioned from predictable hours and pay to on-call employment, need for extra hours elsewhere created a supply of workers for gig apps. Record-breaking valuations for Uber, launched 2011, created the playbook for countless apps aiming to be "*The Uber of....*" lawncare, house cleaning, home nursing, mystery shopping, or some other commodifiable task.

The fragmenting of employment has many impacts, poor health, food insecurity, financial precariousness and political radicalization included. By 2015, the OECD reported unstable work was a primary driver of inequality in industrialized nations. Policy changes permitted precariousness; platforms are driving it to new depths.

EXAMPLES: Efforts to Mitigate Platform Workers' Problems

This list can never be exhaustive, projects and apps come and go. Others pivot to new models. We group initiatives into 20 types of solution within 5 categories.

	Category	Solution	Examples
1.	Organizing	Unionization	Unions for gig workers, largely focused on ride-hailing, include: • Gig Workers Rising • International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers • Rideshare Drivers United / Mass. Drivers United • Boston Independent Drivers Guild • United Private Hire Drivers (UK) • Warehouse Worker Resource Center • Unite Here: One Job Should be Enough • Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) • Telangana Gig & Platform Workers' Union (TGPWU) • IWGB (UK) Independent contractors have been allowed to unionize in some US cities. Britain's Trades Union Congress has tracked gig work issues. Seattle's UNtemp platform offers unionized gig work.
2.		Protests	Early in the 2020 pandemic, Instacart workers went on strike for better terms. In Los Angeles, Uber and Lyft drivers organized a strike to align with Uber's Initial Public Offering. Other cities followed. Abroad, stoppages include UberEATS in London. Public shaming has also been tried, Working Washington delivered bags of peanuts to the HQs of DoorDash and Postmates to protest pay rates.
3.		Training workers	Community Colleges, particularly in California, teach courses in how to maximize opportunities as a gig worker. Samaschool pioneered similar courses. The London Rights Hub aims to ensure gig workers know their legal entitlements.
4.		Rating of platforms	The Fairwork project at University of Oxford ranks gig work platforms for workers. Sourcie helps companies recruit gig workers and ranks the apps.
5.		Lobbying	Groups like the UK's doteveryone have offered a manifesto for better quality gig work. Co-worker fosters diverse campaigns for rights. UK consultancy Autonomy recommend a

			microworkers' charter. In Australia BIT used data to advocate for gig rider safety measures. Calls for government to take over gig work apps have come from commentators and public opinion surveys.
6.	Policy/ legislation	Employee classification	In 2020 California forced gig work companies to give workers employee rights. Some companies decided they were exempt and had to be sued to comply with it, before overturning it. They then helped introduce federal legislation protecting platforms from proworker moves during the pandemic. Many US states now have TNC (Transportation Network Company) statutes that block local governments from enforcing standards on ride-hail services. Gig companies' lobbying successes have informed similar efforts in other sectors.
7.		Hybrid worker classification	Groups like Tech:NYC propose a hybrid category between "W2" (employee) and "1099" (freelance contractor). This could follow Canada with a "Dependent Contractor" status. Comparable initiatives include the NDWA Good Work Code.
8.		Enforcement of worker rights	The EU has rules to protect gig workers. Seattle bans arbitrary deactivation. Ontario forced the Foodora app to allow unionization of riders. Foodora then shut down in Canada. In the US, the Federal Trade Commission went through a phase of crackdowns on gig work companies. In 2026, the International Labour Organization adopted a global treaty for decent gig work they hope countries will adopt. US federal officials denounced it as a threat to American business.
9.		Portable benefits	Writers like Nick Hanauer and David Rolf propose benefits accounts for sickness, unemployment insurance, etc. independent of formal employment. New taxes could fund this. US Senator Mark Warner proposed a bill to pro-rate benefits. Mexico has incorporated platform workers in social security. US states including Utah and Pennsylvania have supported benefits for platform workers. In New Jersey and Washington, state lawmakers have introduced legislation to create portable benefits. A 2017 federal bill was introduced but not passed.

			Commercial players include Catch, which burned through $18m before shuttering in 2023, then attempting a relaunch.
10.		Minimum pay laws for gig workers	A Seattle bill and Minneapolis ruling demonstrate local initiatives in the US. Minnesota's governor vetoed a bill for fear of rising prices. In Europe, the EU proposed region-wide rules.
11.		Fair scheduling acts	Some cities have ordinances restricting employers' right to schedule at short notice. Georgia, Iowa, Arkansas and Tennessee already have state laws on the books blocking any such attempt by their local governments. A variant, show-up pay mandates paying workers who turn up for a shift for which they are then sent home as unneeded. These rules typically apply only to larger employers in a specified sector. As an unintended consequence, restrictions on scheduling of employees can drive take up of "Tap-the-App" staffing services which send temps on demand. Apps sending workers on-demand have included Instawork, Brigad, ShiftLink, Smartlinx, Goodwrx, Deputy, Workjam, Workstream, 7Shifts, Steady, WhenIWork, JoinedUp, Magnit, LaborNow, Veryable, Grafter, Workpop, Syft, Shiftpixy, Bluecrew, Shiftgig, Gigpro, Fountain, Jyve, Gig Salad, Workyourway, Urban, Hourlot, Awign, ShiftMed, PickMyWork, Poached, Jitjatjo, Qwick, Talroo, Papa, Sitter, KARE, Clipboard, Shiftkey, Matchwell.
12.		Fostering competition	Ethiopia's government and its partners have Mesirat, to foster further commercial gig work platforms. In the US, the FTC once announced plans to expose bad gig work platforms. The ILO's Digital Employment Diagnostic toolkit has been applied in countries like Mongolia.
13.	Litigation	Court challenges	A prime mover is Shannon Liss-Riordan, a Boston attorney who has pursued multiple cases against gig economy companies. In Europe Uber drivers sued - mostly unsuccessfully - in Dutch courts for information about algorithms allocating their work and pay. A 2020 case in Canada ruled some controls Uber imposed on workers were illegal. The company has over years managed to uphold a US ban on class actions by drivers but was then swamped by activists filing individual arbitration claims around a seperate issue.
14.	Alternative models	Worker co-op platforms	Start.coop co-ordinates efforts to initiate Co-op platforms, as does Platform Cooperativism while P2P Foundation offers

			these startups a developer toolkit. Juno aimed to empower minicab drivers in a co-op model (but didn't). The Rocky Mountain EOC is trying again, so is Drivers Co-op and Driver's Seat. Colorado has a state-level coop. The UP&GO co-operative sells housecleaning in New York City, retaining only 5% of charges. AlliedUp is a co-op run platform for healthcare staff. Loconomics was a co-op platform for Bay Area therapists and other service providers. Spain has Mensakas, a worker-owned delivery app. CoopCycle is a European federation of bike delivery co-ops in 16 cities. Eva is a Canadian co-op for ride hailing drivers. India has Namma Yatri.
15.		Other platforms aiming to empower workers or small businesses	Managed by Q, Zirtual, Hello Alfred, Shyp (now defunct) and others hire – or once hired - conventional staff then deploy them on short-term assignments. Alto in NYC offers ride hailing with employee drivers. Other examples include Big Night (delivery from eateries in London) and InHouseDelivery which bypasses the big platforms. National Domestic Workers Alliance's Gig Worker Advocates has launched a pilot program with Handy, an online platform that connects house cleaners with customers. The program gives house cleaners a minimum rate of $15 an hour. Beckn is a technology protocol that can be used to build pro-worker gig apps. Appjobs sources workers for multiple gig platforms.
16.	Additional apps	Data aggregators	These intermediaries aim to help workers pick the best opportunities in the fragmented world of gig work apps. They are often blocked by the apps. Rodeo, as example, set out to collate data for UK delivery riders. Deliveroo (now Doordash), the main app refused to integrate. Updated terms then barred workers from allowing this kind of data collection. In the US, Ubercheats was likewise killed off. Yipit tracks apps' market share. Gridwise charge gig workers - who contribute their records - for a shared understanding of pricing and trends (data hidden by the apps). ParaPulse is another stab at getting drivers to donate individual data the labor platforms won't aggregate. Workerbird is a UK example. Academics shaped Gig2Gether aiming to unify gig work data. Mystro acts as "middleware" interacting with driver apps for a worker. Brazil's GigU charges to cherrypick assignments from multiple platforms. Steady went bust in this space.

			Nonprofit Worker Info Exchange encourages workers to pool their data. GigLab Sweden set out to merge data from multiple gig work platforms. Solo is another data brokerage for gig work.
17.		Shift swopping communities	Crew, Shift Messenger, Shyft, Zoomshift and their competitors allow workers to swop shifts that have been dictated by a scheduling system among themselves.
18.		Worker reputation aggregators	WorkHands, Traity (Spain) each at one time aimed to extract a worker's reputational data from multiple sites to create unified verification. One has pivoted away from the model, the other appears to have collapsed.
19.		Increasing income stability	A range of fintech tools target irregular workers. Firms are exploring income insurance for gig workers. Wage insurance can be purchased from some providers. Alia pools domestic worker insurance. Wagestream amortizes precarious income. Other players include: Shiffle, Finmo.
20.		Administration tools	Hurdlr, Sherpashare, Zen 99 (now defunct), Benny and others bundle the kind of services employees get from an HR department for irregulars. Opolis provides payroll services to independent workers. Steady's Income Passport helped gig workers claim unemployment benefit during Covid.

CONTEXT: Challenges of Mitigation

Aside from illegal off-the-books work, people needing personalized hour-by-hour employment have little choice other than today's platforms. With no publicly provided infrastructure for hour-by-hour labor, startup companies have been able to shape this growing part of any economy.

Governments worldwide provide labor market infrastructure; Job centers are an alternative to for-profit staffing agencies, all-sectors job-match platforms such as those commissioned by each US state compete with commercial job boards. (Other countries do the same nationally, for example Canada, Australia and Britain.) They have not done the same for the exploding world of nonstandard work. That has left the technologies, business models and culture of platform companies creating barriers across attempts to mitigate the social and economic damage:

Complexity: Technology running labor platforms can be impenetrably sophisticated. Data is secreted. It is a battle for campaigners to prove wrongdoing, unfair intent or market manipulation. And the sector itself is ever-evolving. Apps come and go in dizzying succession. As one example, Uber extended in 2018 into a general labor market, launched in Chicago and Miami, then abandoned the idea in 2020. Events can move faster than regulators.

Business models: Cheapened, commoditized, controllable labor is core for companies that can have hemorrhaged investor cash subsidizing their way to market dominance. This is illustrated by gig companies' response when California's AB5 bill forced them to give workers employee rights in 2020. They threatened closure, then invested $205m to overturn the legislation. Success gained them new customers and an increase in valuations of $13bn. That return on investment of 6,241% is the grim financial logic campaigns against platforms face.

Fungibility and churn: Gig app operators have no incentive to favor on-going connections between workers and clients (some have fined off-platform relationships, like offering a gig worker a job). This creates high churn among workers who remain commodified for clients unable to request a favored individual. Coupled with lack of progression, this keeps workers interchangeable, diminishing their power. Your current workforce organizes a strike? Just recruit more, the overheads of registration are borne almost entirely by the work-seekers.

Circumvention: The factors above underpin scenarios where a seeming political victory for workers can be quietly neutralized by platforms. Feed a minimum wage rise into a scheduling platform told to hold labor costs at a fixed percentage and it can shave hours very precisely. It is claimed Whole Foods did this. Legislation like Ontario's ban on arbitrary deplatforming could lead to workers who assert their rights remaining on the platform, but not getting assigned any work. UK mandates around "guaranteed hours offers" will likely lead to automated churning of assignments to avert protections predicated on traditional scheduling. And so on.

Framing: By vacating the space for labor market infrastructure outside of traditional jobs, public agencies have allowed platform companies to peddle a false dichotomy. They repeatedly claim "*People who need personalized work hours have to choose flexibility over employment rights*". It's not true. But lobbying bodies, company CEO's and advertising pushes this message, allowing the companies to position themselves as champions of people who need nonstandard work. Regulators and campaigners can then be framed as out-of-touch dangers to those hard-pressed breadwinners.

LEARNING: Limits of Mitigation

Curbing abuse of workers should not be confused with *unlocking the potential* of labor platforms to empower individuals needing nonjob work. Even if every corporate employer and gig company abandoned their business model and restructured around workers' needs, breadwinners would remain stuck in narrow siloes of activity. Unlocking the potential requires horizontal (all work types made seamless) hour-by-hour labor platforms.

This siloing by types of work is not an issue for high skilled professionals. An established architect will maximize her income by designing buildings. None of her other abilities in life will generate as much income. She just needs a *vertical* market to connect with people who commission buildings.

But soft-skilled workers typically have multiple experiences (maybe childcare, petcare, ability to cook, a driving license, competence with computers, perhaps a second language). They benefit in a *horizontal* labor market (all types of work seamless across one platform with like-for-like data enabling comparison of demand, supply and hourly pay across sectors). In this world, a person can earn from their life experiences and aspirations as they wish, with maximum marketplace power.

A horizontal market can be structured around "*Work first*", its primary objective is getting each person whatever periods of employment they need now. Functionality that pays benefits, ensures compliance, builds stability, generates data and creates progression pathways can all then be integrated. It's an alternative to picking from thousands of standalone apps, services and projects.

Only public agencies with their leverage over regional flexible labor spend and supportive facilities have the heft to launch horizontal markets. The private sector has no incentive to do so.

So, campaigners, entrepreneurs, political candidates, social reformers and others continue battling to compel a shifting sand of thousands of vertical labor markets to treat workers with a minimal level of respect. Many of these efforts deserve kudos, some have lastingly curbed exploitation. But the odds are stacked in favor of deep-pocketed, aggressive, sophisticated market operators.