ETUI Policy Brief

European Economic, Employment and Social Policy

N° 2/2020

A global struggle: worker protest in the platform economy

—

Simon Joyce, Denis Neumann, Vera Trappmann and Charles Umney

Simon Joyce is a research fellow at the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre, Denis Neumann is a researcher at the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC), and Vera Trappmann and Charles Umney are both associate professors in employment relations, all at Leeds University Business School.

Key points

The newly developed Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest provides an overview of the developments in platform worker organisation and mobilisation on a global scale. Its findings so far reveal that:
– The main cause globally for labour protest is pay, with considerable geographical variation when it comes to other causes for dispute.
– Types of platform labour protest appear to vary more substantially between regions than between industries.
– Mainstream unions play a vital role in defending platform workers' interests, especially in western Europe, while in the global South, protests are much more likely to be led by grassroots unions.
– Mainstream unions rely more frequently on legal challenges, while unofficial unions rely more frequently on strike actions.

Introduction

Platform work – that is, paid work mediated via an online platform or app – has grown rapidly in recent years.[1] In the ten years since Uber was founded, for example, it has become a household name, given rise to a new verb ('Uberize'), and claims to have almost four million drivers registered on its app around the world (Uber 2019). In 2015, it was estimated that some 45 million workers were registered on labour platforms across the planet, a figure which is almost certain to have since increased (Codagnone *et al*. 2016). Even though it is known that many of the people who are registered on platforms do little work or have ceased to do so, these numbers nevertheless represent the sudden emergence of a significant new group of workers within the global economy. And these workers have proven to be rather vocal about their poor working conditions and new forms of exploitation.

Working conditions in platform work are often characterised by low pay or non-payment, a lack of work or overwork, irregular hours, constant pressure from customer ratings, the risk of sudden 'deactivation' by the platform algorithm, a lack of transparency or accountability in platform decision-making, and reduced social and employment protections (Forde *et al*. 2017). Moreover, major insecurities stem from the '(bogus) self-employed worker' status.

Recent instances of worker mobilisation – such as the legal case brought by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain against Uber that fought for Uber drivers in the UK to be treated as workers rather than as self-employed – have shown that platform work can be challenged successfully. The new and distinctive combination of working arrangements originally led many commentators to question whether platform workers could ever be effectively organised (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018; Vandaele 2018). It is now clear, however, that such fears were misplaced. In fact, platform work has rapidly emerged as one of the most vibrant and exciting areas of labour organising. As will be shown below,

---

1 Estimates of the numbers of people engaged in platform work vary considerably, depending on the definition adopted and methods used. For an overview of different approaches, see Forde *et al*. (2017) and Piasna and Drahokoupil (2019). Two recent estimates differ over the scale of platform work but agree that it is increasing: see Farrell *et al*. (2018) and Huws *et al*. (2019).

etui.

platform workers across the globe have organised themselves to take collective action in defence of their interests and to seek redress for their treatment at the hands of platform companies. Many of these protests have made local headlines or even featured in national news reports, and some have been studied by academic researchers. Up to now, however, there has been no systematic attempt to put together a global picture of platform worker organisation and resistance. This policy brief reports findings from the early stages of an ongoing project that seeks to map platform worker organisation and protest on a global scale. Although still in its infancy, this research has already revealed clear patterns in terms of the issues platform workers are mobilising around, the forms of organisation they are developing, and the methods of struggle they have adopted.

What is new about platform work?

While much attention has been focused on the new digital technology behind platform work, many of its features are not new at all. For instance, on-call working, piece-work payment, workers providing their own equipment, and sub-contracting work arrangements (similar to 'putting out') all date back to the earliest era of the industrial revolution (Stanford 2017).

Some aspects of platform work certainly are new, however. The common practice in platform companies of classifying their workforce as self-employed, or independent contractors, represents – in the global North, at least – a real shift towards insecurity and a lack of social and employment protections for many jobs (cf. Vandaele 2018). Of course, in much of the global South insecure and informal work is far more commonplace. This North-South difference indicates a key divergence in the global experience of platform work. However, the management of work and pay through an app is universally novel and represents a new way for capital to organise workforces. As will be shown, these similarities and differences are reflected in global patterns of platform workers' grievances.

Platform technology gives companies the potential to monitor work performance in a way comparable to that in factory or office-based work, but across a geographically dispersed workforce, so that workers lack the close proximity that has often been central to strong trade union organisation (with some partial exceptions such as food delivery, where workers may more frequently congregate in particular locations). What is more, the lack of legal employee status deprives platform workers of important rights and protections, placing them at a further disadvantage relative to the companies who aim to profit from their work.

The big questions for trade unions, then, are whether these new forms of work organisation require new forms of organising workers, and what the necessary conditions for successful and broad representation are. While existing knowledge is based on a small though growing number of case studies, the aim should be a transnational wide-range comparison. Researchers at Leeds University are developing a tool that offers a global comparison of platform workers' organisation and resistance.

The Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest

The Leeds Index of Platform Labour Protest is being compiled by researchers at the University of Leeds Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC), using data drawn from a combination of online resources, including news media databases, labour movement reportage, activist networks and online forums, particularly the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDELT) that accesses worldwide news reports in 65 languages with a real-time translation.[2] Our aim is to develop a comprehensive database and online interactive map which collates and categorises instances of labour protest in the platform economy on a global scale. It is intended to serve as a shared resource for activists, unions, researchers, and policy-makers. The interactive map will be searchable and enable us to visualise the spread of platform labour protest across time and space. In categorising protests, we recorded the variables shown in Table 1.

Table 1 **Variables studied**

Variable	Main categories
Date	
Location	
Cause	Pay, employment status, and working conditions
Kind of dispute	Strikes, demonstrations, legal actions, and online actions
Actor initiating dispute	Mainstream unions, insurgent or unofficial unions, self-organisation, joint actions

Source: Leeds Index.

As the database develops, it will enable activists to share strategies and information, including on how different contexts and issues produce different responses from workers, and which responses are most likely to be successful. In short, it provides an overview of developments in the global confrontation between platform capitalists and platform labour.

For researchers, the tool is important and innovative because it sheds light on trends which have previously been beyond the grasp of existing research, which has mainly focused on particular platforms or on groups of platform workers in particular locations. It provides vital context for case studies of particular disputes and campaigns, enabling researchers to situate the lessons of these disputes in a wider global picture.

The Leeds Index has evident limits at its current stage of development. Our focus on news media means that less visible online actions, such as boycotts coordinated by online forums, are likely to be underrepresented in the database. Some countries may also be underrepresented, particularly those such as China where platform work has developed significantly but where political restrictions mean protest is less likely to be reported. Addressing these limits requires diversifying data sources, particularly by

---

2   See https://www.gdeltproject.org

increasing the flow of information from activist networks, which could potentially lead to a genuinely crowdsourced approach to research.
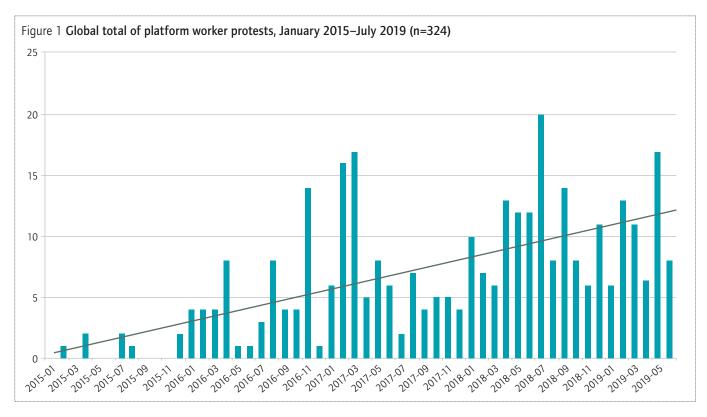
Despite these limitations, the Leeds Index has already generated useful insights into global trends and variations in the way workers respond to the problems of platform work. The real value of the project lies, however, in its potential to evolve and update in real time as workers' own strategies evolve. In this respect, we hope it can become a vital resource for understanding and documenting new frontiers in workers' struggle.

Platform worker protest is on the rise, with western Europe leading the way

To date, we have collated over 300 incidences of platform worker protest from around the world, dating from January 2015. While we aim to assemble data from cases of labour protest in all forms of platform work, the highest number of incidents so far has emerged in three industries: food delivery, courier work and transportation. Figure 1 demonstrates that the first striking feature of the data is the steady global increase (albeit with peaks and troughs) of platform worker organisation and protest. Of course, it is possible that early instances of platform worker protest may have been underreported in the sources we are drawing from. Nevertheless, the steady increase across the period suggests that the increase is real, which would fit with widespread increased awareness of these struggles. Globally, there is a roughly equal split between three main types of action: strikes (30%), demonstrations (27%), and legal actions (34%).

Types of platform labour protest appear to vary more substantially between regions than between the three industries. As Figure 2 shows, the region with the highest number of recorded protest incidents was western Europe. This may reflect a genuinely higher prevalence of platform labour protest in this region, but at this stage we cannot rule out that other regions are underrepresented due to the methodological limitations discussed previously. In some respects, regional variation fits with what we already know about comparative industrial relations. For instance, our data indicated that there is a strong regional divide in terms of the types of action pursued by platform workers. Workers in the USA and Europe tend to integrate legal challenges against platform employers into their repertoires of action much more than workers in Latin America, South Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. The latter regions tend to be much more heavily reliant on tactics such as strike actions and demonstrations. It is likely that this pattern is linked to the more developed institutional and legal resources available to workers in the global North, as well as reflecting the clearer benefits attached to achieving legally recognised employment status. In such cases unions are more likely to pursue a 'logic of influence' compared to a 'logic of membership', whereby they have motive and opportunity to strengthen their position in relation to external stakeholders (Vandaele 2018). Unions outside the global North may tend to rely more on cultivating an organised membership base.

In other respects, we have identified patterns that do not fall easily into regional clusters. For instance, when we look at the kinds of issues that provoke disputes and the kinds of organisations that coordinate them, a complex picture emerges which cuts across distinctions between North and South.

Figure 1 **Global total of platform worker protests, January 2015–July 2019 (n=324)**

Source: Leeds Index.

Figure 2 **Platform worker protest around the globe, January 2015–July 2019 (n=324)**

Source: Leeds Index.

Regional variation in causes and worker organisations involved

We have found considerable geographical variation in the causes of disputes: a global overview is given in Table 2, which excludes those regions where less than ten incidents of protest were counted.

Although pay is globally the most common reason for protests, its relative prevalence compared to disputes over working conditions, legal employment status or regulatory problems varies hugely by region. In the US and UK, pay is the issue behind the majority of disputes. In continental Europe, however, pay is just one concern among several, and no more important than employment status, working conditions, regulation or union representation. In India and Pakistan, pay is the issue behind the overwhelming majority of disputes, while in sub-Saharan Africa it is level with working conditions as a cause of disputes, and barely features at all in Latin America where working conditions and regulatory issues are much more important. Understanding the causes of these variations will allow for a deeper understanding of the context of platform labour disputes in each region, but this requires further qualitative investigation alongside the continued extension of the index.

Table 2 **Causes for disputes (n=330; January 2015-July 2019)**

	Global North			Global South				
	UK and Ireland	US and Canada	Western Europe	India and Pakistan	Southern and central Africa	Latin America	Other regions	Overall
Pay	31	39	15	14	5	1	11	116
Working conditions	20	15	9	2	5	12	6	69
Employment status	24	17	13	0	0	2	11	67
Regulatory issues	8	9	9	0	1	7	11	45
Union representation	2	3	7	0	0	0	2	14
Deactivation	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3
Rating system	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Other	2	1	2	2	3	4	1	15

Source: Leeds Index.

Table 3 **Type of worker organisation by region (n=319; January 2015-July 2019)**

	Global North			Global South				
	UK and Ireland	US and Canada	Western Europe	India and Pakistan	Southern and central Africa	Latin America	Other regions	Overall
Unofficial unions	47	21	14	12	6	13	10	123
Mainstream unions	34	22	28	3	2	1	8	98
Informal organisation (such as social networks)	1	5	2	0	2	2	3	15
Combination of unions and other actors	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
Uncategorised	0	5	4	2	2	6	7	26
Other	8	28	5	1	3	5	5	55

Source: Leeds Index.

Globally, the majority of platform labour protests in our database are led by trade unions, either unofficial or mainstream, rather than forms of extra-union self-organisation (although the latter might be underestimated due to their lack of visibility). As Table 3 shows, there is a roughly even split between those led by established, mainstream trade unions and those led by unofficial, grassroots or insurgent unions; yet the prevalence of these two kinds of union actors is geographically uneven. In continental Europe, mainstream unions have been the most important actor in platform labour protest, but they still only account for around half of these kinds of protest. By contrast, in the global South, protests are much more likely to be led by grassroots unions. In the US and the UK, there is an even split between mainstream and grassroots unions in platform labour protests. Globally, though, it is striking that only around 40 per cent of platform labour protests are organised by established, mainstream unions. A significant minority of platform worker protests are organised by entirely informal networks, online groups, or other new forms of organisation – all of which need further investigation in order to understand the processes of worker mobilisation taking place.

Industrial differences

The combinations of actors involved in platform worker protests appear to be relatively stable across industries, as Table 4 demonstrates. For instance, differences between transportation, food delivery, and courier services (the industries that currently dominate our dataset) seem to be less profound than those between different countries and regions. Furthermore, on the global scale, the division between mainstream and unofficial unions in who is leading these protests remains relatively similar in each industry. Important industrial distinctions can be observed in other areas, however. For instance, legal actions are more frequent in courier delivery, compared to a much more strike-heavy approach taken by food delivery workers. Another notable difference is that regulatory issues feature much more frequently as a cause of disputes in transportation than in other kinds of platform work; this is presumably related to the issue of transportation apps such as Uber having a well-known track record of attempting to circumvent transportation regulations.

Table 4 **Industrial differences by union type (n=219) and action type (n=289; January 2015-July 2019)**

	Courier services	Food delivery	Transport	Other industries
By union type				
Unofficial trade unions	13	41	65	4
Mainstream trade unions	10	32	50	4
By action type				
Litigation	12	21	66	9
Demonstration	8	20	55	1
Strike	4	36	56	1

Source: Leeds Index.

Most common methods: legal action on employment status and striking for pay

We note that different kinds of actors tend to focus on different problems and use different strategies. Mainstream unions rely more frequently on legal challenges, while unofficial unions rely more frequently on strikes. This difference may be consistent with the distinction between the logics of influence and logics of membership (see Vandaele 2018), insofar as legal challenges by mainstream unions leverage union power in relation to other stakeholders, whereas the emphasis insurgent unions place on strike activity reflects their greater focus on developing a membership base. Likewise, unofficial unions are more often focused on pay, while mainstream unions tend to take on a more even mix of concerns. This difference may reflect the fact that issues such as employment status and regulation are more prevalent as causes of dispute in regions where official unions are more involved in platform workers' protests. Moreover, in such countries, winning legal battles over employment status can result in important gains regarding minimum wages, paid leave, and other protections. It is also interesting to note that strike action and pay disputes seem to go together; globally, issues around pay are by some margin most likely to involve strike action. Likewise, globally, almost three quarters of strike actions were primarily about pay. By contrast, employment status or regulatory issues tended, unsurprisingly, to be addressed using more 'institutional' strategies such as legal challenges.

Conclusion

In this policy brief we have introduced the Leeds Index: a work in progress, but one which has the potential to greatly enhance our understanding of labour protest in the platform economy. We have described the tools we have used so far to populate our database, and identified ways in which we hope to fill in gaps in the future. Our initial research leads us to some tentative conclusions. Notably, we stress the importance of regional differences in the nature of actions and types of concerns motivating platform labour protest. We have also identified key differences between the kinds of actors that lead platform labour protests, and the types of actions and concerns they pursue. In order to further contextualise and test these differences, however, a much wider dataset is needed that is both quantitative and qualitative.

References

Codagnone C., Abadie F. and Biagi F. (2016) The future of work in the 'Sharing Economy': market efficiency and equitable opportunities or unfair precarisation?, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, JRC Science for Policy Report EUR 27913 EN. doi:10.2791/431485.

Farrell D., Greig F. and Hamoudi A. (2018) The online platform economy in 2018: drivers, workers, sellers, and lessors, Washington, DC, JPMorgan Chase Institute. https://institute.jpmorganchase.com/institute/research/labor-markets/report-ope-2018.htm

Forde C. et al. (2017) The social protection of workers in the platform economy, Study for the EMPL Committee, European Parliament. http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU(2017)614184

Huws U., Spencer N.H., Coates M. and Hotls K. (2019) The platformisation of work in Europe: results from research in 13 European countries, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies. https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/686-the-platformisation-of-work-in-europe.html

Piasna A. and Drahokoupil J. (2019) Digital labour in central and eastern Europe: evidence from the ETUI Internet and Platform Work Survey, Working Paper 2019.12, Brussels, ETUI. http://bit.ly/ETUI-WP2019-12

Stanford J. (2017) The resurgence of gig work: historical and theoretical perspectives, Economic and Labour Relations Review, 28 (3), 382-401.

Uber (2019) Company info, Uber Newsroom. https://www.uber.com/en-GB/newsroom/company-info/

Vandaele K. (2018) Will trade unions survive in the platform economy? Emerging patterns of platform workers' collective voice and representation in Europe, Working Paper 2018.05, Brussels, ETUI. http://bit.ly/ETUI-WP2018-05

All links were checked on 27 January 2020.