# STORY 5. When workers exploit the platforms

### Julian Posada

Eduardo[[1]](#footnote-1),[[2]](#footnote-2),[[3]](#footnote-3),[[4]](#footnote-4),[[5]](#footnote-5) is a former employee of Venezuela’s Ministry of the Environment who lives with his wife and elderly parents in the city of Coro near the country’s Caribbean coast. The worsening economic situation and Eduardo’s position as the family’s sole breadwinner prompted him to change jobs. Initially, he worked as a schoolteacher, at first full-time and later more sporadically, after a friend showed him how to make money online using a data labeling platform.

The platform has had many names: CrowdFlower, FigureEight, and, finally, Appen, after an Australian company acquired it. Eduardo is a user of this platform (in reality, an independent contractor) and classifies the world from his home computer. Recent tasks have involved categorizing companies according to their core business and clothing according to the brand and type. He receives the instructions in English but reads them in Spanish using Google Translate.

Even the latest iteration of the large language model, GPT-4, which uses a technique called ‘Reinforcement Learning with Human Feedback’ requires human input –and labor– to operate. Platforms like the one Eduardo works for have enabled a system where workers’ labor, knowledge, and cognition is extracted from territories that have the tools for online work and difficult economic situations as in the case of many in Venezuela and other places in the Philippines, India, Kenya, and other countries worldwide. Platform workers are required to generate, annotate, and verify data, tasks that are essential for artificial intelligence systems like GPT-4 to function.

When Eduardo started working for the platform, it was difficult to find tasks because they could appear at any time of the day, sometimes in the middle of the night and on any day of the week. However, the job provides more income than his regular teaching job, up to ten U.S. dollars per task, vastly exceeding the local minimum wage. As a result, Eduardo decided to exploit the platform as much as possible.

Of course, he realized that he could not make more money alone, so he created a group with other workers in Venezuela, using Telegram to communicate. At first, the group only included people Eduardo knew from his neighborhood, but the group rapidly grew, accepting numerous people from across the country. Eduardo pooled the membership fees to hire a coder in Spain to develop a bot that alerts members when a task becomes available, allowing them to work on it before it disappears. This tool allows Eduardo and other members to focus on tasks and increase their earnings. Their pooled fees also serve as a form of insurance, enabling the group to help when something happens to a member, such as becoming the victim of an online scam or facing some other emergency.

Workers also share insights about tasks and how to understand English-language instructions, as well as tips for maximizing earnings on the platform. These strategies can include using different accounts simultaneously, despite the platform’s prohibition, which expects obedient and autonomous workers. However, users with numerous accounts and extensive networks of cooperation, motivated by resistance to precarity, are the ones labeling their data. This may not be the high-quality data the platforms’ clients desire, but it doesn't even matter for people like Eduardo. For him, defending his family, neighborhood, and colleagues—his community—is a priority. He is unconcerned about some data that is used to train machines for some unknown companies.

Consequently, the platform profits but also falls victim to its design, losing clients because cheap, controlled, and distributed labor does not yield a superior product. This realization is not universal, enabling Eduardo and his colleagues to resist and engage in myriad ways in the ongoing fight against those who view labor is a mere commodity.

1. Eduardo is an anonymous worker who shared his experience with me during my journey as a researcher and educator. I want to use this venue to tell his story and share the projects of colleagues who are fighting against data extractivism and platform exploitation. Colleagues from the Fairwork project are ranking platforms based on five essential fair work principles—no single platform worldwide has had a minimum score. The Platform Cooperativism Consortium maintains a list of alternative platforms functioning as cooperatives, where workers have a voice in management and share ownership. Artist Mimi Onuoha and activist Mother Cyborg developed a pamphlet that explains artificial intelligence, its ethics, and societal implications. I included their project and other readings in a publication for the Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts. I want to thank the many workers like Eduardo who took the time to share their stories and believe that a better future of work is possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fairwork. https://fair.work/en/fw/homepage/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Platform Cooperativism Consortium. https://platform.coop/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mimi Onuoha and Diana Nucera, A People’s Guide To AI, Michigan: Allied Media, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Julian Posada, ‘Controller of the Universe? A Reading List on Labour and Technology’, Mayworks Festival Of Working People & The Arts, 5 May 2022. https://mayworks.ca/2022-festival/2022/readinglist [↑](#footnote-ref-5)