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Digital Platforms, Gig Economy, Precarious Employment, and the Invisible Hand of Social Class

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Abstract

Digital platform capitalism, as exemplified by companies like Uber or Lyft has the potential to transform employment and working conditions for an increasing segment of the worforce. Most digital economy workers are exposed to the health damaging precarious employment conditions characteristic of the contemporary working class in high income countries. Just as with Guy Standing or Mike Savage's "precariat" it might appear that digital platform workers are a new social class or that they do not belong to any social class. Yet the class conflict interests (wages, benefits, employment and working conditions, collective action) of digital platform workers are similar to other members of the working class.

Keywords

digital platform work, gig economy, platform capitalism, social class, precarious employment, precariousness, working class, precariat

In the last 4 decades, the political economy of labor markets in wealthy capitalist economies has shifted away from the standard employment condition of contracts with unlimited duration, a 40-hour work week, and benefits.[1,2] Thus, new contractual forms referred to as "nonstandard," "flexible," "atypical," "contingent," "temporary," "informal," and, in particular, "precarious"

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employment arrangements have become a common feature in the social inequalities and occupational health literatures.[3,4] Researchers, the International Labor Organization, and the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, among others, have contributed to more precise conceptualizations of these constructs. Thus, contingent work is characteristically defined by the absence of any explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment, while precarious employment tends to include various dimensions, such as contract duration, wages and benefits, vulnerability to being abused, and capacity to exercise workers' rights.[4] Underlying these employment arrangements or conditions (a term used in the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health) is the employment relation, or power relation with economic consequences, a notion shared by most sociological traditions.[5] The asymmetric relationship between the buyers of labor (employers) and the sellers of labor (workers) allows employers to appropriate the fruits of workers' labor in terms of profits (i.e., exploitation), ultimately claimed via property rights, and force, a process known as domination.[5] Therefore our occupational health context is one of stable employment relations with changes in employment conditions manifested in many nonstandard employment conditions, which weaken labor's position vis-a-vis capital.[6]

The advent of the Internet as a technological innovation in the labor market has led to "gig work" or "gig economy," a type of contingent work where employers, workers, and clients use online platforms or mobile apps to conduct transactions.[7] Gig economy may not be the best term to refer to these contingent workers, since gig work is not new: the term has been used, for example, among jazz musicians[8] and other artists who perform "on demand" or "on call" without digital platforms involved. As with other types of contingent work, digital platform workers have some discretion in determining the amount and schedule of their hours of work and can own the technology necessary to conduct their work (e.g., a car).[7] Important cutting-edge qualitative accounts of gig work[9,10] suggest that the majority of workers involved in this type of contingent work are exposed to employment conditions deemed as precarious[4] (temporary contracts, lack of benefits that include health insurance in the United States, vulnerability to wage theft) and that it might, therefore, have a negative impact on workers' health. Thus, digital platform workers seem to be exposed to employment and working conditions that also characterize contingent and precarious employment.

The gig economy raises an important question for public health researchers in terms of the uniqueness of its employment relations and conditions. As with precarious employment, we face some key questions about the population health implications of the gig economy: do short-term employment transactions using online platforms between workers and employers define a unique set of contingent workers with specific exposures and material interests? It would seem that digital platform or gig economy workers might be exposed to unique forms of hazards at work brought about by the technology behind programs such as Gigster or Mechanical Turk and large new companies such as Amazon, Google,

Uber, or Lyft. Yet the gig economy functions under contingent employment conditions (shift from permanent to independent contractor legal status, short-term contracts, low wages, and lack of benefits) and under traditional employer-worker property relations, i.e., class relations.[11,12] For example, digital platforms extend the possibility of uninterrupted 24/7 real-time monitoring of workers, likely raising the mental stress produced by close monitoring.[13] On the other hand, the collective interests of digital platform and gig economy workers concur with those of contingent workers, precariously employed workers, and workers in general in the transportation and service sectors, where they are concentrated.[7] Behind the employer's rhetoric of "sharing economy," "flexibility," and "independence," equally used for other types of precarious conditions,[4] lies a familiar set of health hazards. Among them we find job insecurity, job demands, low wages, lack of benefits (pensions, workers' compensation, health insurance),[7,9] and difficulty in forming a union. The transformation of standard work arrangements into independent contractors is not only a misclassification but also a loss of regulation that signals increased health risks for workers.

It is therefore important to realize that the interests in reducing occupational health risks are common to workers in general, including contingent, precarious, on demand, or digital platform. For researchers in the social inequalities in health field of study, this implies addressing not only technology but employment relations and conditions as well.[14] In a recent interview, Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton stated that "You know, in the U.S., we do not have a working class."[15] The capital-labor conflict plays out in universities too.

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