

INTRODUCTION

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Workers and organised labour are being challenged by the increasing expansion of digital labour platforms in most countries worldwide. Within the growing landscape of digital platforms across different sectors of the economy, the distinctive feature of digital *labour* platforms is that they match the demand and supply of labour and are ‘the predominant form of platform connecting workers with businesses and clients’ in the provision of a wide variety of services (ILO, 2021, p. 43). Such digital platforms and their algorithms create controversial forms of work relationships and undermine traditional labour organisation, leading to extensive public and scientific debate. A key dimension of these debates is the business model of digital labour platforms, which can limit workers’ access to labour rights and collective organisation, as well as erode national social models. Most platform workers use strategies without collective representation, which means using individual unmediated labour relations to solve work-related problems. At the same time, a lack of collective worker recognition hinders workers’ access to labour protection.

This book is one key outcome of our research project *Crowdwork – Finding New Strategies to Organise in Europe* (2019–2021).¹ Our objectives were to analyse the profiles of platform workers, and their collective representation strategies enacted through trade unions and alternative forms of worker organisation (alternative associations/movements,

1. Funded by the Directorate General Employment and Social Affairs of the European Commission. In the book, our research project is also referred to as the *Crowdwork project* (and similar). Project website: <https://crowd-work.eu>

grassroots unions, etc.).² The research focused on three economic sectors (passenger transport, food delivery and professional digital services) in four European Union member states (Spain, Portugal, Hungary and Germany). Through our empirical fieldwork and cross-country analysis, we hope to bring new insights and uncover new ground in this emerging field of study. Our original research is presented in the chapters of this book, each authored by researchers who formed part of the project team.³

We present a range of pathways for workers to collectively articulate their voice, strengthen their position and harness any potentially positive effects of the platform economy and platform-based work. Our empirical research highlights the diversity of political, institutional and organisational forms across the different countries studied. We have observed new and adapted business models and forms of work organisation in different sectors of the platform economy. Due to the diverse contextual and institutional frameworks, the impacts of these platform working models differ significantly across the countries. However, there have also been common trends that challenge platform workers across all countries in recent years, such as algorithmic control, the prevalence of insecure working conditions and increasing direct competition between individual workers. In response to these working conditions, the collective needs of workers and public debates on platform work, the authors also explored a range of policy options for improving labour rights and social protection.

Our research into workers' conditions has been timely and has supported policymakers and stakeholders. Overall, the contrasts drawn between the four countries and the three sectors studied enabled us to share insights into the diversity of approaches within Europe. Among this diversity, we found creative, inspiring and new forms of resistance against the degradation of work. Unsurprisingly, the strength of institutions influences the extent to which trade union and social movement strategies are successful in securing fair and

2. Note from the Language Editors: For the purpose of describing worker profiles in this book, sets of working terminology were established. First, 'women' and 'men' are the gender identities specified in the book. There is an awareness that other identities exist on the gender spectrum although they are not explicitly referred to (such as LGBTQI+; see Sandhu, 2021, and Social Protection and Human Rights, 2021). Second, in relation to migration, the book understands a repertoire of terms (such as person of migrant status, person without the legal right to work, migrant worker, digital nomad, asylum seeker, migrant association and diaspora) that reflect the different criteria, frameworks and intersections which influence how 'people who cross frontiers' self-identify and are categorised by others (ILO, 1975; Kuptsch and Mieres, 2021; Walia, 2021).

3. The editors wish to especially thank the language edition work done by Chris Hotz and the Media Doula team, and the publication edition by Professor Rui Santos and his team at CICS.NOVA FCSH.

transparent working conditions. To date, there has been a lack of European policy on platform work and as this book was being finalised, European and national legislation was being developed and informed by several of its authors.

Research landscape

In this field of research, there is a multitude of concepts used to describe digital labour platforms. Schüssler et al. (2021) argue that the lack of a single concept for platform work can be explained by platforms being highly diverse, hybrid and malleable. A clear example of the changing terminology is the move away from the term ‘crowdwork’ towards the term ‘digital platform work’ – the latter more accurately describing the vast types of work and tasks carried out online. We have witnessed this shift in terminology in international debates and within developments in the *Crowdwork project* – noting that some authors still prefer to use the term ‘crowdwork’ due to the specificities of their academic context.

We use the Eurofound definition of ‘digital platform work’, specified as ‘the matching of supply and demand for paid work through an online platform’, with six further characteristics: paid work organised through an online platform; three parties are involved (the online platform, the client and the worker); the aim is to carry out specific tasks or solve specific problems; the work is outsourced or contracted out; jobs are broken down into tasks; and services are provided on demand (de Groen et al., 2018, p. 3, p. 9). Digital labour platforms organising this kind of work are classified into two main types: ‘*online web-based platforms*, where tasks are performed online and remotely by workers [...] and *location-based platforms*, where tasks are performed at a specified physical location by individuals such as taxi drivers and delivery workers’ (ILO, 2021, p. 31).

In the platform work literature, the employment status of platform workers is one of the most contested topics (de Groen et al., 2018; Pesole et al., 2018; Vandaele, 2018; Huws, Spencer and Coates, 2019; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, 2019). The point of contention is that, in most countries, the platforms do not consider themselves to be the employers of the platform workers. This labour status conflict becomes one of the main legal problems to be solved through negotiation and regulation. The policy debate on the rights of platform workers has focused on the differences between ‘location-based’ (such as Uber) and highly skilled ‘online web-based’ (such as Upwork) platform workers. The latter are generally content with their entrepreneur status, as evidenced by their high

levels of satisfaction with their income and autonomy. However, many workers, particularly those on the location-based platforms, complain of employment status misclassification and report several work-related problems on organisational, technical and individual levels. The most frequently reported problems include long working hours, the ‘uncontactability’ of platform personnel and barriers to collective representation. Furthermore, the existence of so many different types of platform workers creates fragmentations and tensions that compromise efforts to find common solutions.

To date, there are few quantitative sources regarding digital platform work. However, a significant study by Brancati et al. (2020) estimates that in 2018 the percentage of working-age internet users who had ever gained income by working via these types of platforms was highest in Spain (18%), Portugal (13%) and Germany (12%); in contrast, in Hungary the estimate is much lower at 6.9%. In terms of those in the same population who had platform work as their main occupation, the figures were much lower. In Spain, 2.6% were engaged mainly in platform work, followed by Germany and Portugal (1.5%), and Hungary (1.4%).⁴ Therefore, Brancati et al.’s study shows similarities between Spain, Portugal and Germany, and to a lesser extent, Hungary.

Our methodology: Combining the ‘single’ and ‘multi’ case study approaches

Alongside a comprehensive review of both the academic and grey literature focusing on platform labour and their collective representation, the four country research teams carried out more than one hundred interviews with platform workers, platform operators and managers, and trade union leaders and experts. In analysing interview data, researchers adopted an interpretative inductive approach, drawing on ‘grounded theory’ (Miles, et. al. 2013; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The core research ambition was not to test hypotheses using quantitative data analysis collected from large-scale surveys but to identify the concepts and interpretations deployed by platform workers regarding their work, working and employment conditions, worker profiles and collective organisation. Based on literature reviews by each country team, we developed a comparative framework along the key dimensions of institutional context, employment status and work-related problems, worker profiles and collective

4. The actual surveyed population was ‘internet users aged between 16 and 74 years old’ (Brancati et al., 2020, p. 10).

strategies, and designed four semi-structured interview templates tailored to platform workers, representatives of trade unions, freelancer/owner movements and alternative associations or movements (Crowdwork project, 2019). Data from interviews and collected document sources were analysed within each national research team and the resulting descriptive inferences were discussed and compared among teams, leading to interpretive conclusions along the above-mentioned dimensions.

The research combined ‘single’ and ‘multi’-case study methods (Tomory, 2014). In the case of the location-based platforms (such as Uber, Bolt, Glovo, Wolt and Deliveroo), each national team carried out single national case studies. However, in the case of the web-based global platform Upwork, a comparative multi-case study analysis – covering Hungarian, German, Portugal and Spanish experiences – was conducted and is presented in the book. Regarding care services mediated by digital labour platforms, a discursive comparative chapter is also presented drawing on fieldwork in Germany and Spain. The concluding chapter also presents a discussion of initial comparisons between the different fieldwork case studies. The ‘multi-case study’ and comparative sections offer a starting point and platform for a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional contexts, regulations, worker profiles and collective strategies across the countries studied in our research project.

Our results

The book is structured in three parts. In the first part, we outline the contexts of digital labour platforms in Germany, Hungary, Portugal and Spain. The second part comprises three sets of chapters analysing different digital platform sectors: passenger transport, also known as ride-hailing (including Uber and Bolt platforms); food delivery (where workers are known as ‘riders’, ‘couriers’ and ‘food deliverers’); and professional digital services (Upwork freelancers and care workers; as well as the boundary cases of call-centre workers placed in platform-managed ‘telework’ at home and accommodation hosts on the Airbnb platform – even though these are not strictly speaking digital labour platforms, we deemed these cases relevant because they evidence the pervasiveness of platform-work processes and logics across different areas in the platform economy and the economy at large). In the third part, we present recommendations from each country’s team of researchers, and the book closes with a concluding chapter

drawing together research findings, discussing comparisons, and setting out European and future research recommendations developed by the editors.

In terms of future strategies for collective worker organisation and policy, the authors highlight three urgent priorities: improving the employment status of platform workers, understanding and enhancing the interplay between traditional and emergent forms of labour organisation, and addressing the complex impacts of the algorithmisation of work. The outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) accelerated the search for and implementation of new models of work and employment. To guarantee decent and fair working and employment conditions in the changing practice of work, we recommend paying more attention to the national, institutional and cultural differences shaping platform work. The outcomes of this European research project may help to identify the diverse frameworks and dynamics which shape the range of institutions, collective actors, and strategies for worker organisation and policymaking. Through this book, we hope to share our research with wider publics, supporting and enriching both discussion and action.