

Covid-19: who will protect gig workers, if not platforms?

SE socialeurope.eu/covid-19-who-will-protect-gig-workers-if-not-platforms

Funda Ustek-Spilda, Richard Heeks and Mark
Graham

28 May
2020

Gig workers already bore most of the risk associated with their work. And their platforms haven't been keen to mitigate it during the crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic has infected nearly five million people across the world, resulting in more than 300,000 deaths. Some countries have started to ease their lockdown measures. But elsewhere in the world infections continue to spread—last week the World Health Organization recorded the highest number of new cases reported in 24 hours—signalling that the pandemic is unlikely to disappear any time soon.



Funda Ustek-Spilda

Gig work has always involved an asymmetry of risk between the worker and the platform, with the worker bearing most of the burden. But those asymmetries have been sharpened during the pandemic: it is workers who bear the risk of losing their jobs; it is workers who bear the risk (and serious potential consequences) of infection and loss of income, while simultaneously providing essential services for societies in lockdown.

As Fairwork Foundation, we have reviewed the circumstances of the estimated 50 million gig workers around the world. We have analysed the measures taken by 120 platforms in 23 countries across Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa. We have structured these responses according to the five core principles of fairness at work we have developed: fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation.

Richard Heeks

Worrying outcomes

Evidence on the impacts of Covid-19 on gig workers is so far limited, fragmented and uneven. The reports which do exist reveal however worrying outcomes. Half of platform workers report having stopped work due to lack of demand for their services or because the platforms they work on have suspended operations during the pandemic.

Reports on workers who have continued to work during lockdown suggest that on average their earnings have dropped to around one-third of pre-pandemic levels—a 70 per cent loss of income for Gojek moto-taxi drivers in Indonesia, for instance, and in the

US a 65 per cent drop for drivers who work for ride-hailing platforms such as Uber and Lyft. For workers who worked on platforms which have stopped their services entirely (such as some domestic work, personal grooming and beauty services), the fall in their earnings has been even sharper—unless the platforms or their governments have offered some kind of financial assistance.

The picture, though, is differentiated. Not all demand for the services offered through the gig economy has declined—food, parcel and grocery deliveries being notable exceptions. In response to this demand, some platforms have expanded their services, particularly focusing on grocery deliveries (such as Deliveroo in the UK and Uber in the US, India and South Africa).

‘Independent contractors’

Tracking the responses of platforms during the pandemic has revealed a shift. Some platforms initially claimed that they were not going to provide any benefits at all to their workers—because they are independent contractors and, if they are ill, they can *choose* to take time off. But this response has changed as the virus has infected more and more sections of the population.

Our analysis shows that, overall, what workers want and need is primarily pay-related—to maintain their income. Yet with the exception of some which are providing some level of sick pay, platforms have largely left this to governments. Instead, they have focused mainly on preventative measures, which are predominantly aimed at protecting and reassuring customers—although they also happen to protect workers to some extent.

While many governments have dumped their ideologies and torn up their rulebooks to respond to this unprecedented threat, platforms have not. Except, perhaps, for the introduction of sick pay, they have been incremental rather than radical in their responses.

We see this incremental approach across the board, in the choices being made by some platforms: offering loans rather than grants to workers; deferring rather than waiving loan repayments; simply telling workers to disinfect rather than providing them with the facilities to be able to do so; providing general health-and-safety information rather than bespoke personal advice, and paying minimum sick pay rather than maintaining past earnings during illness.

Ratchet effect

Despite calls from prominent politicians, platforms have not altered contracts to reclassify workers as employees or dependent contractors, and have been keen to avoid a ratchet effect, whereby measures taken now could later be interpreted as equating workers with employees. This is notable in the language being used with sick pay, typically described as ‘a one-time pay adjustment’ or ‘a support payment’. Nor is there evidence of any significant engagement with worker associations and representatives.

Many of the measures taken can be seen as beneficial primarily to the platform and/or its customers—in seeking to maintain its level of business, for example—with benefits to workers only a side effect. Measures introduced by platforms solely for the benefit of workers have thus been relatively rare.

It is early to accuse platforms of ‘fair-washing’—of making well-publicised statements about their actions to help workers, and then deliberately failing to deliver. Policies are however often couched in the language of the get-out clause rather than the guarantee: ‘We are actively working to provide ...’ rather than ‘We will provide...’, ‘You can apply for ...’ rather than ‘You will receive ...’, or ‘Personal protection equipment will only be provided at select locations’.

As many countries across the world are easing their lockdown measures, the evidence of the next few weeks will therefore be important—to see whether the majority of gig workers truly benefit from provision of personal protection equipment, sick pay and other measures, whether they will remain after the pandemic and, if they do, in what form.

The coronavirus has popularised the term ‘social distancing’. In the post-pandemic world, we should popularise ‘solidarity’ instead—and hold the platforms accountable for protecting the health and safety of their workers.