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Study Summary

Platform work, namely paid work mediated by digital platforms, is on the rise in the Czech Republic as well as in the European Union as a whole. While services such as food or goods delivery and people transportation are the most frequently occurring forms of platform work in Czechia, even care work or creative professions are covered by algorithmically managed platforms these days. In spite of that, this work continues to be performed in a legal framework that is insufficiently defined and inadequate to its nature. Workers are often formally viewed as self-employed individuals even if their activity meets some criteria of dependent work. Based on a qualitative study undertaken within the SYRI project, we define algorithmic management of work as another key challenge. Here, workers are subject to opaque decision-making mechanisms driven by a logic they do not comprehend, ones they cannot influence but are constantly required to adapt to. This model exacerbates the precarization of work, limits job security, precludes planning, and imposes an additional psychological and physical burden. Although platform work provides some level of flexibility, it is often unsustainable and unstable in the long term.

Practical Recommendations:

- **Transposing the European Directive:** Promptly implement the EU Directive on improving working conditions in platform work, including the legal presumption of an employment relationship and regulation of algorithmic management.
- **Introducing a Legal Definition of Platform Work:** Form a legal framework that is responsive to this form of work and clearly defines the rights and obligations of all parties.
- **Making Information about Algorithms Available:** Insist on algorithm transparency and openness of automated decisions to human review.
- **Promoting Collective Association:** Promote unionization and the emergence of community initiatives for sharing experiences and collective bargaining over conditions.

Introduction: What Is Platform Work? The Context and Situation in Czechia

Although the phenomenon of platform work has been shaping employment and the labour market for more than 15 years, we have especially seen a steady growth of its importance in the past couple of years. At the global level, a significant growth of work mediated by digital platforms was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tubaro and Casili 2022) due to both a growing demand for services such as food delivery and an influx of workers who had lost their jobs in the service or hospitality sectors. At the same time, platform work is bringing new sector-specific challenges. Scholarly literature and political debates on the topics frequently discuss the intertwined issues of the legal status of platform workers on the labour market, protections of their labour rights,

and obligations of platforms as “employers” – and the present paper takes the same perspective. Another challenge identified below is that the nature of the work is driven not by humans but by platform algorithms, which are opaque and often incomprehensible to the workers; this is the challenge most frequently mentioned by the workers themselves. Both these dimensions (legal status of workers and their lived experiences of platform work) are inextricably linked, and both should inform future policies in the field.

Platform work can be defined as any form of paid work mediated by a digital platform, i.e. a digital infrastructure that allows multiple parties to interact with one another (Fernandez et al. 2023). Institutional documents and scholarly studies provide different typologies of platform work, with the following common types:

- food or goods delivery (platforms in Czechia include Wolt, Bolt Food, or the local company Foodora, but also online supermarkets such as Rohlik.cz or Kosik.cz),
- taxi services (Uber, Bolt, or the local company Liftago),
- the so-called sharing economy, with platforms enabling the sharing of services, products, or premises (typically rentals mediated by the Airbnb platform, but also car ride sharing),
- platform-dependent creative work (sellers on platforms such as Amazon, Etsy, or the local Fler),
- platform-based service outsourcing (less common in Czechia) used for one-time gigs such as house cleaning.

We can also include the so-called creator economy, i.e. content creators based on platforms owned by Meta (Facebook, Instagram), Google (YouTube), or OnlyFans. However, since the specific status of these workers differentiates them from other types of platform work (they are more clearly subsumed under freelancers), most studies treat them separately. Nevertheless, content makers and other platform workers share many challenges such as weak labour rights protections or dependence on algorithms (Glatt 2022).

There is currently a scarcity of available data about platform work in the Czech Republic. We can only rely on the results of a comparative quantitative survey organized by the European Trade Union Institute in 14 EU countries; the results are more than three years old and the Czech sample is relatively small (ETUI Internet and Platform Work Survey, 2021). It shows that the Czech Republic does not deviate from a European trend, with approximately 20% of Czech workers reporting experience with platform work over the past 12 months before the survey (slightly above the EU mean of 17%). A substantial proportion of workers (about one in three) opted for platform work as a way of earning extra earning. Therefore, this trend in the Czech labour market can be expected to grow in the context of shrinking real income and growing demands of decent living.

The Pitfalls of Platform Work

Platform work in Czechia is performed in a legal and institutional void. The existing framework is consistently inadequate to the specifics of this labour market segment. Most platforms formally treat their workers as self-employed contractors or temps, irrespective

of the level of their dependence on the platform or control over working conditions, remuneration, and access to work. In many cases, platform work meets some criteria of dependent work as defined by Czech labour law, i.e. performing the work personally, for remuneration, in compliance with the employer's instructions, and at the employer's responsibility. Although this framework should be applied to a part of digital platform workers, the State Labour Inspection Office consistently lacks both the capacities and the specialization required for reviewing these new forms of employment. As a result, most cases remain outside its purview, and the workers are left without adequate protections and without the rights that would legally be entitled to.

Platforms are allowed to withdraw from their labour law and social security obligations and to shift all risks to the individual worker because the existing legal framework fails to recognize platform work as a special category. There is no binding definition of a platform-based employment relationship, no rules of algorithmic management, and no specific protections in case of abrupt dismissal or unequal treatment.

Moreover, high levels of insecurity and precarization are characteristic of this model of work. The notice periods, severance bonuses, legal protections, collective bargaining framework, and social security associated with the traditional employment relationship are all missing. Job sustainability is uncertain due to not only algorithmic management but also high competition and a pressure to work constantly. The income often falls short of expectations, workers burn out quickly, and their cumulative income from a few small gigs hardly covers the cost of living.

Platform work is often performed in low-skill occupations, which improves access but also renders workers easily replaceable. This further undermines their bargaining power vis-à-vis deteriorating conditions.

Gender inequalities play an important role as well. In the Czech context, with its prevalent norm of intensive motherhood, inaccessible child care services, and traditional assignment of gender roles in housework, platform work is often chosen involuntarily by women with small children who have no other ways of returning to the labour market. Care services (house cleaning, babysitting) platforms, where women primarily work, do not provide any assurances or security. In addition, women face lower levels of income, difficulty reconciling work with care, and multiple discrimination in the case of migrant women.

Workers' Experiences: Summarizing the Qualitative Study

In the autumn of 2023, we conducted a qualitative empirical study to map the experiences of platform workers in the Czech Republic. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews with workers were conducted either in person or on Zoom, with a duration of 60–120 minutes. The interview data was complemented with observation of the workers' other experiences: Those who consented to post-interview data provision supplied the researcher with screenshots of the platform apps used by them, their conversations with other workers,

or observations recorded in writing or as voicemail. The research sample includes 12 men and 3 women. Although we originally aimed for a gender-balanced sample, we failed to achieve it due to a predominance of men in the most frequently occurring forms of platform work in Czechia, namely food and goods delivery and taxi services. Nevertheless, this selection of respondents reflects the real situation in those sectors. Nor could we achieve a nationally representative sample in terms of place of residence, as most of our respondents come from major cities, especially Prague and Brno. Despite a lack of available data, we assume that this distribution reflects the general situation in the labour market, with most of the demand for platform-based services concentrated in those two cities.

Sample representativeness was not a criterion in the design of our survey because we sought to capture workers' everyday lived experiences. Still, it should be noted that the sample consists exclusively of persons of Czech ethnicity. While it can be assumed that migrants of various immigration statuses, who are in a more vulnerable position than Czech citizens, account for a relatively high proportion of drivers on platforms like Uber, for instance (a fact often mentioned by the respondents), the situation of migrants in the platform economy would require a longer-lasting presence in the field and remains a topic for another study.

Therefore, the following chapter summarizes the main challenges and benefits of platform work as lived and formulated by workers themselves. To respect the privacy and safety of all survey participants, all interview quotes and other data have been anonymized and nicknamed.

Table 1: Overview of the respondents

Nickname	Age	Type of platform work	Region
Jan	50+	bicycle courier, Wolt and Foodora	Brno
Tibor	30+	courier, Foodora	Brno
Prokop	50+	driver, Uber and Bolt	Praha
Jana	50+	driver, Uber	Praha
Saša	30+	driver, Uber	Praha
Martin	40+	courier, Wolt	Praha
Tadeáš	20+	driver, Uber and Bolt	Praha
Miroslav	20+	driver, Uber and Bolt	Praha
Jaromír	40+	courier, Rohlík	Praha
Petr	20+	courier, Wolt	Brno
Ludmila	30+	seller, Fler	South Moravian Region
Vít	30+	courier, Wolt	Praha
Pavel	40+	courier, Rohlík	Vysočina Region
Jaroslav	40+	courier, Foodora	Brno
Luboš	30+	courier, Foodora	Praha

Motivations for Work in the Platform Economy

Most respondents had already been active in the platform economy before the COVID-19 pandemic. It was only in about three cases that the pandemic and related job loss became the main motivation for this type of work. The respondents' experiences also reveal that the pandemic had differential impacts across types of platform work. On one hand, Jana as an Uber driver in Prague suffered a decline in the number of jobs because she was primarily used to driving tourists. On the other hand, delivery service and online supermarket couriers accounted for an extreme growth. For example, Pavel left his job shortly before the first outbreak with plans to make a living as a driver, but the COVID-19 pandemic motivated him to take up a courier's job with the Rohlík platform.

Almost all respondents referred to *flexibility* as the main motivation driving them into platform work. The ability to somewhat organize one's working hours and decide whether one wants to work in the morning, in the afternoon, or at night, or the opportunity to take days off and work the weekends were mentioned among the main advantages of this type of work. The level of flexibility differs from platform to platform. Czech companies like Foodora or Rohlík use hybrid systems in which couriers can schedule their shifts, e.g. for the next two weeks. On one hand, this gives them a better idea of how much they are going to earn (although expectations may not be met because earnings depend on an array of other factors). On the other hand, these systems make work somewhat less flexible because having to work scheduled shifts may run contrary to one's current needs as a carer, for instance.

Respondents needed flexible work for different reasons. A few mentioned the need to reconcile work with care for children. For example, Jaroslav has shared custody, and his job allows him to be at home on weekdays when his children arrive from school. Tadeáš and Miroslav identified the ability to work overnight as their main motivation for becoming Uber drivers because it allowed them to pursue some activities during the day (such as attending a retraining course).

However, the declared flexibility often runs contrary to the workers' financial strategies. All respondents mentioned having set a minimum monthly amount of earnings they could not afford to fall short of. In most cases, this target required them to work for 8–10 hours a day and at least 5 days a week. Due to these constraints, we consider the job flexibility to be rather symbolic, affecting the distribution of working hours but not organization of work itself. Another limitation to flexibility is the fact that workers find it extremely difficult to plan their earnings, especially with platforms like Uber or Wolt, because everything depends on the amount of jobs, which can be estimated based on experience but remains uncertain. Ultimately, most workers report working equal or longer hours than in their previous jobs.

Main Challenge: Algorithmic Management of the Platforms

The need to cooperate with a platform's algorithms was mentioned as one of the main challenges across our sample of respondents. For example, Pavel described his experience as follows:

> *It's a kind of artificial intelligence that tells me where to go and all the information. Because when I arrive at the address, my order is ready and it just tells me where to go. And it works. I mean the system ... works more-or-less well in real time because I am almost never late, I just do what the app tells me. So there's no person behind it. Or there are some people but they're coordinators, they don't tell us what to do, the system tells us what to do.*

The International Labour Organization refers to this way of organizing work as algorithmic management, defined as "the use of computer-programmed procedures for the coordination of labour input", i.e. for organization and distribution of work. Algorithmic management is used in other contexts as well, e.g. in mass manufacturing, but it is platform work where it has become the defining aspect of workers' everyday lived experience.

Workers typically report ambiguous experiences with algorithmic management, as exemplified by Tibor's account:

> *My impression most of the time is that the algorithm is clever and more-or-less works. But sometimes something happens and then I don't understand it because I can see other boys having more jobs, the algorithm suddenly favouring them, and then you must find out what exactly you've done. But sometimes you just don't find anything, there is no reliable way of figuring it out.*

Similar situations, namely changes to an algorithm's decision-making that the workers perceived negatively but were unable to prevent or decipher, were often mentioned in the interviews. At the same time, the accounts attest to several strategies used by workers to adapt to the situation: **learning, self-optimization, and anticipation**.

The mechanism of **learning** is mentioned by Tibor in the above quote; other respondents said, for example, that they took notes about the app's behaviour to be able to assess the algorithm's long-term behaviour. Jana added that drivers share these findings and notes in their closed communities (Facebook groups or WhatsApp group chats) and make a collective effort to "map" Uber's algorithm. Jan described a situation when a change in a platform's algorithm caused an exodus of couriers to another platform:

> *So they changed it again because people started leaving on them because Foodora just started looking better. But it didn't go back to where it had been before, the calculation is now different, and to some extent now ... you need to somehow learn which job will pay and which one won't. So then you need to learn this all over again.*

By saying so, Jan simultaneously hints to another strategy, one mentioned the most frequently, namely **self-optimization**. Most respondents emphasize the need to constantly assess data about an algorithm's behaviour and to adapt their actions accordingly. For example, Tadeáš provides the following description:

> *If I wanted to give advice to a beginner, to a guy who has arrived here, doesn't speak Czech, has no idea, so this kind of guy is really disadvantaged – he's not acquainted with the navigation assistant, can't tell that a job won't even pay, that he'll just get stuck in traffic and basically lose money without even knowing which way to go around the jam. So I'd tell them, hey, there's technology, but do learn the map by heart. Because otherwise you can't compete with people who have driven those streets inside out.*

Ludmila, too, refers to optimization by emphasizing the need to comprehend the ways different platforms will display her goods to customers:

> *Someone might think they'll just upload pictures and that's it, but it actually works differently at each platform. I'll post it on Fler, but there are items that'll do really well for us on Facebook, where it will be easy money. But you have to figure out the times, you just have to learn this, and you have to build your community, it won't build itself, so you better observe what people click on, have your statistics.*

Ideally, then, self-optimized action provides one with the ability to keep "one step ahead" of the algorithm, as Luboš puts it. The strategy of **anticipation** can be viewed as the last stage of the learning process in which workers collect and assess data, learn how the algorithm behaves, and then try to keep ahead of the game. At the same time, though, most workers admit that it is impossible to apply the process just once, that each change in algorithmic management puts them back to the starting position. As noted by Ludmila, *once I lose it, it's awfully hard to build again*.

With respect to the opacity of algorithms, which behave like a "black box" that cannot be inspected, some authors talk about so-called *information asymmetry*, where a platform keeps gathering and analyzing vast amounts of data for its algorithm to learn but these data are not available to the workers themselves (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). At the practical level, information asymmetry gives rise to "algorithmic precarity" (Wood and Lehdonvirta 2022), a situation in which workers' vulnerability is exacerbated by their inability to influence, and lack of control over, the decisions of an algorithm. However, most respondents view algorithms as neutral decision-making mechanisms, as exemplified by Prokop's account:

> *Well, when there's a dispatcher, it can happen that she simply likes someone better, she's had a fight with you and then you just won't get the job or don't even want to talk to her. I find this fair because it's free from that kind of emotions.*

While this observation directly contradicts what many respondents refer to as situations when "*the algorithm no longer likes you*", most respondents share Prokop's attitude and perceive algorithms as neutral forces that deliver fair decisions whenever possible, although such fairness is opaque and there is no way of verifying how the decisions are made. When something does not work, workers interpret it as an input for themselves, for their self-optimization. This confidence in the algorithm's neutrality strengthens the information asymmetry and transfers responsibility to workers.

Visions of the Future, Sustainability of the Current Model

The last topic frequently mentioned in the interviews concerned the question of sustainability of platform work as a person's gainful employment in future. Especially

younger workers often perceived their present position as a temporary one. For example, Luboš became a courier during the pandemic and has kept the job for its flexibility in the context of caring for his newborn. Similarly, both Tadeáš and Miroslav, who are friends and flatmates, talk about the driver's job as a way of accumulating savings, paying off their car, and getting ready for other opportunities such as starting a business. In contrast, workers over the age of 40 voiced concerns about potential health problems. For example, Jan as a bicycle courier notes that so far, the job is healthy for him by keeping him fit, but he will not be able to continue in this way till retirement. Jana says that long hours sitting in her car are not ideal for her joints and overall mobility.

Generally speaking, most workers perceive platform work as a suitable, or at least available, solution to their current situation considering their qualifications, life stage, or financial situation, but do not consider this way of making a living to be sustainable in the long term. The typical reasons include low stability, inability to generate long-term savings, the need to working despite health problems (with no sickness insurance available at the time of data collection).

Summary and Recommendations

The above findings point to two major problems of platform work: (1) unclear legal status of the workers, most of whom operate as self-employed individuals despite performing a kind of dependent work: they depend on the platform as a mediator but they are not entitled to job security, regular earnings, or even health or social insurance; and (2) opaque algorithmic management of the distribution and organization of labour, which leads to an ever-growing information asymmetry. Both these problems are addressed by the EU Directive on improving working conditions in platform work. Adopted in October 2024, the Directive responds to the spread of precarious forms of work in this fast-growing sector. It seeks to strengthen the protection of the rights of people working through digital labour platforms, increase the transparency of algorithmic management or work, and restrict false self-employment, i.e. incorrect designation of workers as self-employed individuals.

The Directive introduces a legal presumption of an employment relationship as one of its key tools. If a platform controls key aspects of job performance – such as by defining remuneration, scheduling work, limiting workers' ability to refuse jobs, monitoring job performance, or restricting access to customers –, the status of an employee will automatically be applied to the workers unless the platform proves the opposite. This is a fundamental change to the rules applicable to hundreds of thousands of platform workers in the EU, including the Czech Republic, where most of these workers are categorized as self-employed individuals.

Regulation of algorithmic management represents another key aspect of the Directive. An obligation is introduced for platforms to inform workers about the functioning of algorithms responsible for allocating tasks, defining remuneration, or evaluating workers. At the same time, platforms are prohibited from taking key decisions – e.g., contract termination, account suspension, or worker penalization – in an exclusively automated

fashion, without human review. This step aims at increasing transparency and protection against any discriminatory practices by digital platforms.

Furthermore, the Directive imposes additional information obligations on platforms. Workers will be entitled to clear and written information about their working conditions, the system of managing work, and algorithmic decisions. The aim is to limit the opacity of and unilateral changes to rules by the platforms and to improve workers' understanding of their rights and obligations. If a worker is granted the status of an employee, they will become entitled to standard labour law protections, including minimum wage, regulated working hours, sickness insurance, social insurance, and maternity protection. Furthermore, the Directive sets a framework for collective bargaining even by workers with atypical contracts.

In the Czech context, where platform work has been growing rapidly in recent years and where thousands of people work in under-regulated conditions with minimal protections, the Directive provides a crucial impetus for reviewing the legal framework. Its implementation in national law has the potential of considerably improving the status of platform workers, combatting false self-employment, and strengthening the protection of fundamental labour rights in the digital economy.

According to European Commission estimates, the measures targeting the risk of misclassification of platform workers will lead to considerable economic and social impacts. Above all, an estimated 1.7–4.1 million individuals across the EU will be reclassified as employees, thus becoming entitled to protections and rights in line with labour laws and regulations applicable at the national and EU levels.

This change should also have a direct fiscal effect by adding approx. €4 billion to Member States' tax and social insurance revenues. At the same time, by obtaining the status of an employee and related rights, platform workers across the EU should tap additional earnings of up to €484 million a year.

These estimates make it clear that regularization of labour relations in the platform economy is not only a matter of protecting workers' rights but also helps Member States make their tax and social systems more effective and equitable. The transposition countdown for implementing the Directive in national legal systems has begun, with a deadline of December 2026, which brings the Directive the to the fore of the Czech legislative and expert debate.

In addition to modifying laws to implement the Directive, it is necessary to promote more informal ways of worker organizing. Most respondents report that their work is performed basically anonymously, that workers in the platform economy have no colleagues and do not know their customers because they are likely never going to meet them again. Informal ways of bottom-up organizing have already emerged. For example, Facebook or WhatsApp groups are used by workers active in the same region or city district to share information, collectively discuss any changes to algorithms, and try to decipher them. Therefore, future policies should seek to support and possibly formalize the association of these workers on the basis of labour unions.

Conclusion

The debate about platform work in the Czech Republic continues to be burdened by a number of myths and self-legitimizing narratives actively promoted by the platforms. Central to them is the idea that platform work ensures flexibility, high earnings, and autonomy. However, the empirical evidence often shows that earnings fail to meet expectations and workers are subject to opaque algorithmic management that fundamentally limits their actual control over the work.

In the effort to demystify platform work, it is also necessary to highlight the invisible reproductive work required for people to be able to work at all – from child care to household chores to regeneration of one's own body after physically and mentally demanding shifts. At the same time, platform capitalism creates the illusion that such care is not needed or that each individual is able to ensure it on their own, "outside the working hours", but there is often no such thing as working hours.

Therefore, to truly improve platform workers' conditions, it is necessary to disrupt this self-legitimizing imagery and openly articulate the structural inequalities and hidden costs of the platform economy. Consistent implementation of the recent EU directive into the Czech legal framework may be the first step towards improving the working conditions of platform workers. Yet its actual impact will depend both on the details of its transposition and on the willingness of the government administration to go beyond minimal requirements and truly realize the Directive's ambitions.

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