

Gig Economy, Algorithm driven Surveillance and intensified labour exploitation

'Gig' means short term job and Gig Economy means the free-market system which comprise part-time workers, freelancers, independent contractors, contract workers, and project-based workers. Even, internships are becoming part of Gig economy.

Gig work is usually typified by **four characteristics**: irregular work schedules; **workers providing some or all capital** (e.g. mobile phones, cars, or bikes); piece-rate work remuneration; and work being arranged and/or facilitated by digital platforms. Thus the Gig Economy is also called Platform economy.

While the corporate media try to show the white collar IT free-lancers as sole gig workers and try to show case it as the future of labour market opted by the workers for its flexibility, the reality is different. The gig economy excludes workers from minimum wage, overtime, paid medical leave, protection from wage theft, anti-discrimination laws, and occupational safety protections. In fact, it takes workers to the initial days of Industrial revolution where workers have no rights. Workers in the 'on-demand', 'fulfilment', 'delivery' markets which are absorbing most of the new work force are the most exploited. These 'flexible' employment arrangements result in precarity, with workers absorbing market risks and social responsibilities.

Major gig economy employers: Uber, Lyft, Turo or Fiverr, Foodora, Deliveroo, Amazon, Swiggy, Zomato, etc.

Platform economy model:

German-based Foodora and British-based Deliveroo are examples of an on-demand food-delivery platform, through which consumers can order food for delivery from local restaurants. The labour process on both food-delivery platforms is similar. Workers log in to a dedicated worker app at the start of pre-arranged shifts, thus signalling their availability to work. When an order is placed by a customer, and subsequently approved by the corresponding restaurant, an algorithm automatically allocates the delivery task and sends a notification to the selected worker. Once the task is accepted, the worker navigates to the restaurant, collects the order, and then delivers it directly to the customer by bike, moped or car. Throughout the labour process, the worker's movements, location and performance are captured in real time by the worker's smart phone. Algorithms run on this data and determines the allocation, remuneration, chastisement and sometimes even the termination of human labour. The assessment criteria are opaque and frequently change without the workers knowledge.

For most of these platforms, algorithmic surveillance is the crux of their organisational processes.

Algorithm-driven platform labor

Coupang South Korea's largest e-commerce platform dubbed "The Amazon of South Korea," uses a combination of multitiered employment structure and algorithm-based surveillance of workers keeps money-losing operations **efficient for management — and deadly for workers**. To date, eight fulfillment workers, including two temporary ones, have died of overwork. The latest victim was a forty-eight-year-old night-shift foreman identified only by his surname, Yi.

Before he died of a cerebral haemorrhage in early March, he was very close to gaining regular employee status after a year of temping. He worked nonstop at his fulfillment center and, after work hours, he used Coupang's supervisory app on his smartphone to track deliveries in hopes of becoming full-time, with benefits under a fixed-term contract longer than a year — he had to outdo his co-workers and outlast two separate short-term contracts to join the top 15.5 percent of Coupang's 13,000-strong fulfillment workforce. Yi died two days after being posted to a new job with his new status.

Coupang is now the country's third-largest employer, behind only Samsung Electronics and Hyundai Motors. In addition to an army of contract workers like Yi, the company hires about **forty thousand people on a daily basis** via a smartphone app for the fulfillment centres. All these are possible thanks to a large pool of platform labor populated by precarious workers who depend on apps to land their gigs. As of 2019, one in every four South Korean workers is temporary, according to the OECD.

Central to Coupang's highly automated operations are algorithms meant to surveil and track workers. Even its own public relations video reveals that fulfillment workers use little safety gear while feeding high-speed conveyor belts.

Workers are required to carry a handheld device that tracks every single movement and monitors the speed and volume of their work. **Their performances are measured in how many Units they Process each Hour (UPH). UPH is not an hourly quota — it is instead used to measure all workers on the same line, one against another, in per-hour movements.** The metric ensures all workers, new and experienced, compete against one another to work harder and faster. They skip bathroom breaks to keep up. Supervisors often publicly scold the laggards, who will eventually be denied a new contract or gig.

Coupang uses another similar process, APH to keep drivers delivering more and faster. The **average-per-hour (APH)** measure works similarly to UPH as it is used to monitor and rank the hourly performances of drivers working their designated area.

The condition is even worse for Coupang Eats, which now has more than 210,000 couriers who deliver food. Coupang uses a complex fee structure to pay couriers depending on region and peak hours. The Fees can change every five minutes.

From Amazon to Alibaba, Uber Eats to Deliveroo, logistics, capitalists around the world use surveillance algorithms to whip up fear and extract increased labor from desperate workers, fattening their own purses.

These Companies aggressively capitalize on the vulnerability, insecurity and precarity of workers in the form of platform labor often pressing the temporary and gig workers to the point of fatal exhaustion. What keeps these firms afloat is a cheap pool of unregulated gig labor.

More and more corporations are structuring their businesses to employ gig workers so they can avoid their legal responsibilities and violate workers' rights with impunity.

The silver lining is Unions are trying hard for new worker legislations like the PRO (Protecting the Right to Organize) Act and raising movements to pull these gig worker under their ambit.

Gig Economy statistics:

- About 36% of US workers are now involved in the gig economy. India is not far behind, it ranks 2nd in the global freelance workforce after the United States.
- US freelancers contributed \$1.28 trillion to the American economy in 2018.
- If the gig economy keeps growing at its current rate, more than 50% of the US workforce will participate in it by 2027.
- 42% of young people freelance.
- India's gig sector is expected to grow to \$455 billion by 2024 at a compounded annual growth rate of 17 per cent.