

A 'union' for gig workers will have its work cut out

The sheer diversity of platform workers means their needs differ and representing them will be a challenge.

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Platform workers may soon be able to have formal representation through union-like organisations, and this is a crucial step towards ensuring their long-term welfare. Nevertheless, there are key concerns that should be addressed.

The nature of platform work has made such representation difficult around the world. In Singapore, such workers remain viewed as independent contractors and do not fit into the traditional mould of employer-employee relationships. Also, many such workers do not work for any platform exclusively – they may switch between platforms throughout their working day.

And yet, the Tripartite Workgroup on Representation for Platform Workers has announced that they will have representation here. Legislation may follow, and soon platform workers in Singapore may be in a better position to negotiate their conditions and enforce settlements through arbitration.

But the big question is how such representation could be made most effective.

A HETEROGENEOUS WORKFORCE

Different platform workers face different challenges. In Singapore, most of them are either private-hire drivers or delivery riders. But their situations can vary, depending on whether private-hire drivers use their own cars or rent them from a company, or whether riders use a motorbike or an e-bike.

The biggest differences arise from whether they earn most of their income from platform work or whether this merely supplements what they earn from full-time jobs.

A survey of 1,002 food delivery riders conducted late in 2022 by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed that only 46 per cent earn their income solely from being a food delivery rider. This might impact which issues are important to them and what causes a representative body should champion. For example, part-timers, who already have coverage through their full-time jobs, may not want wide-ranging protection schemes from their platforms, especially if they have



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to pay more for them. On the other hand, full-time platform workers might be more keen to have such schemes as they may depend on the platform for most of their welfare needs.

ASSOCIATIONS TO GET NEW TEETH

Workers have traditionally negotiated better wages and working conditions through representation. This is not easy in the case of platform workers.

Nonetheless, associations such as the National Delivery Champions Association (NDCA) and various online groups have been set up to cater to these platform workers. These organisations can gather platform workers together to share their

knowledge and air their grievances about the structures imposed on them by the platforms.

However, such associations have been able to engage platforms only informally. But this will change once the recommendations by the workgroup are implemented. Platforms will then be legally mandated to negotiate with the representatives of platform workers, with the Government also playing a role in this tripartite arrangement.

There is also a question mark over whether enough platform workers want to be represented at all. Only 40 per cent of the delivery riders surveyed by IPS were members of the NDCA – or

any other association representing their interests. When asked if they believed paying a small membership fee for an association to represent and negotiate for riders' interests would be better for their well-being, just under half of the riders agreed. Also, only 18 per cent mentioned they would like help with managing disputes with platform companies. Many more said they preferred help to obtain cash assistance.

A quarter of the respondents said they would rather rely on self-organising to deal with the problems that come their way during work. New media channels make it easy for such communities of workers to come together. But many do not realise such informal groups are not

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likely to influence the issues that truly matter to platform workers – such as higher minimum fares.

UNIQUE DIGITAL CHALLENGES

For representation to be truly effective, these new associations must be able to deal with the quagmire of algorithmic management.

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Still, many have devised strategies to maximise their earnings – from clearing their phone cache to owning multiple platform apps. This is called folk tradecraft, but algorithms remain a mystery to them.

Even the recommendation by the tripartite workgroup seems to protect companies from "sharing operational details such as matching algorithms". This is understandable as these algorithms are the "secret sauce" for business competitiveness, and Singapore does well to protect entrepreneurial efforts.

However, a balance should be struck between promoting transparency and protecting business interests. For example, platform companies could explain how their systems make decisions. This would help workers and their representatives comprehend why workers were allocated jobs, how their performance is assessed, and how their rates are set.

Also, when it comes to disputes, the platforms can rely on big data to back their case while the workers and their association have access to only limited data. Associations should have their own digital experts to help level the playing field and assess whether these digital platforms are engaging in exploitative and unfair processes.

Associations can also learn from collectives like the Worker Info Exchange that help platform workers retrieve their data from various platforms. By collating and comparing the data from scores of workers, these data collectives can provide platform workers with a better idea of how fares compare between platform providers for similar routes and distances. This allows the workers to make better decisions to improve their earnings.

If bodies seeking to represent platform workers can find ways to address these considerations, they will be in a much better position to make a difference in the lives of these essential workers.

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