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Collective Interests in Individualised Work: An Empirical Analysis of Self-Perceptions and Orientations of Platform Workers and their Implications for Regulation and Representation

Serkan Topal, Paul-Fiete Kramer, Fabian Hoose, Fabian Beckmann*

Abstract: This paper addresses the question of platform workers' demands and perceived challenges regarding their working conditions. Firstly, it examines these demands and challenges in detail. Secondly, it explores whether, despite the atomisation of workers, there are shared demands concerning the regulation of their working conditions. These questions are investigated using both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings reveal that, despite the prevalence of precarious working conditions and an 'objective' need for regulatory measures in the platform economy as highlighted in previous research, only a minority of the workers studied advocate for collective interest representation. In contrast, the majority support the notion of self-responsibility. These findings indicate significant challenges regarding regulation and representation within highly individualised labour in the platform economy.

Keywords: *Platform work; Working conditions; Collective interests; Regulation; Social security; Mixed methods.*

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1. Introduction

In discussions surrounding the digitisation-driven transformation of the economy at large, with a particular focus on the labour market, platform work has garnered increasing attention. This emergent sector encapsulates various processes of de-standardisation of labour across spatial, temporal, and organisational dimensions[1]. Most work within the platform economy is conducted as part-time self-employment and is facilitated online, leaving many workers without a clear spatial-organisational point of reference. In this context, the platform economy provides opportunities for flexible supplementary earnings and a greater degree of autonomy in organising work.

However, this self-determination and individual freedom in the platform economy frequently coincide with unstable and insecure working conditions. Work in this sector is characterised by a high degree of volatility, particularly in relation to significantly fluctuating working hours and income[2]. Platform companies exploit these complexities within the relationship between labour and capital, positioning themselves as new intermediaries that aim to generate profits within multi-sided platform markets[3]. Consequently, this often leads to precarious employment conditions for platform workers, raising critical questions about the necessity of regulating platform work[4].

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[1] F. Hoose, S. Rosenbohm, *Tension between autonomy and dependency: insights into platform work of professional (video)bloggers*, in Work in the Global Economy, 2022, vol. 2, no. 1, 88-108.
J. Schor, S. Vallas, *Labor and the Platform Economy. Reengineering the Sharing Economy: Design, Policy, and Regulation*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

[2] A. Pesole, M. C. Urzì Brancati, E. Fernandez Macias, F. Biagi, I. Gonzalez Vazquez, *Platform Workers in Europe. JRC Science For Policy Report*. Evidence from the COLLEEM Survey. European Union, Luxemboug, 2018.
M. C. Urzì Brancati, A. Pesole, E. Fernandez-Macias, *New evidence on platform workers in Europe. Results from the second COLLEEM survey*, European Commission, (JRC Science for Policy Report), Luxemburg, 2020.
A. Piasna, W. Zwysen, J. Drahokoupil, *The platform economy in Europe. Results from the second ETUI Internet and Platform Work Survey*, Brussels, 2022 (European Trade Union Institute Working Paper, 2022.05).

[3] D. Cutolo, M. Kenney*, Platform-Dependent Entrepreneurs: Power Asymmetries, Risks, and Strategies in the Platform Economy*, Academy of Management Perspectives, 2021, vol. 35.
J. Drahokoupil, K. Vandaele, *Introduction: Janus meets Proteus in the platform economy*, in J. Drahokoupil, K. Vandaele (ed.), A Modern Guide to Labour and the Platform Economy, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 2021, 1-32.

[4] F. Beckmann, F. Hoose, *From loopholes to deinstitutionalization. the platform economy and the undermining of labor and social security institutions*, in Partecipazione e Conflitto – The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies, 2022, vol 15, no. 3, 800-826.

Against this backdrop, tensions emerge: collective issues in platform work—such as low incomes, lack of social security, and stark asymmetries between platform companies and workers—confront individual interests and the employment patterns of largely atomised workers. This raises the question of whether collective regulation and interest representation remain essential. It is crucial to distinguish between the 'objective' problems relating to working conditions and their subjective perception, which is influenced by the highly individualised employment strategies and patterns of the workers themselves. These individual self-perceptions are vital for understanding the workers' demands regarding regulation and interest representation. The pressing question is whether common interests exist at all, and if so, how these collective interests can be effectively represented.
Traditionally, collective intermediaries such as trade unions have functioned as "transmission belts"[5] between workers and employers; however, such actors have been notably absent in the platform economy from its inception. Meanwhile, some grassroots initiatives with innovative approaches, as well as efforts by established organisations (such as industry trade unions like IG Metall), have emerged in this field. Nonetheless, the conditions for workers' participation in established and institutionalised forms of interest representation appear to be unfavourable in the context of the platform economy[6].
This paper explores the challenges facing workers' representation and their implications for regulating work in the platform economy through two main research questions:

1. What demands do platform workers have, and what challenges do they perceive regarding the working conditions of their platform activities?
2. Are there shared demands among platform workers concerning the regulation of their working conditions, and if so, what are they, and who should represent their interests?

These questions are examined using both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative component is derived from an online survey conducted

[5] R. Dukes, W. Streeck, *From Social Norms to Legal Norms: Regulating Work in Postneoliberal Political Economies*, in E. Kaneff (ed.), Explorations in Economic Anthropology, Berghahn Books, 2022, 137.
[6] F. Hoose, T. Haipeter, *Individualisierte Plattformarbeit und kollektive Interessenartikulation*, in T. Haipeter, F. Hoose, S. Rosenbohm (ed.), Arbeitspolitik in digitalen Zeiten: Entwicklungslinien einer nachhaltigen Regulierung und Gestaltung von Arbeit, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 2021, 143–178 https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748923046-143.

with German platform workers (n = 719) as part of the "Platform Economy and Social Security" project, which is funded by the FIS network of the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS). Additionally, a second qualitative data collection is currently underway; we draw on 18 interviews conducted thus far for our analysis. These qualitative data are further supplemented by additional interviews (eight interviews with European platform workers conducted in 2020) from a PhD project focused on 'work orientations and employment structures' of platform workers.

The paper is structured into six sections. Chapter 2 provides an overview of workers' motivations and the working conditions prevalent in the realm of platform work, based on prior research. Chapter 3 discusses how platform work diverges from established labour market practices and welfare state institutions and outlines existing labour and social policy measures aimed at improving the employment situation of platform workers. However, little is known about the demands of platform workers themselves concerning representation and regulation. Our analysis focuses on the regulation of social security for platform workers, underscoring that the regulatory and socio-political framework of gainful employment in Germany has historically rested on two foundations: collective regulation at both the company and supra-company levels and state-organised social insurance systems that protect against the risks inherent in modern wage labour.

Clearly, the heterogeneous employment arrangements and individual interests of platform workers pose significant challenges for social protection and regulation within this context. The guiding assumptions of our study are summarised at the end of this chapter. Chapter 4 outlines the data and methods employed in our study. The results of our analysis are presented in Chapter 5: first, we examine the working conditions to which platform workers are subjected, how they perceive these conditions, and the demands and employment-related strategies they advocate in relation to platform work. Second, we elaborate on the demands and expectations of platform workers concerning the regulation of platform work, focusing on whether and to what extent they express a need for the integration of platform work into existing institutionalised structures of employment. Additionally, we consider the desire for collective organisation and representation of interests regarding working conditions. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the study's findings and discusses the implications for the social protection of platform work and the collective organisation of interests in individualised work contexts.

2. Work in the Platform Economy in Europe

The platform economy is increasingly permeating various spheres of social life. Consumption, information, and communication are progressively mediated through digital platforms, facilitating economic diversity that ranges from sales platforms (e.g. Amazon, eBay) and crowdfunding platforms (e.g. Kickstarter, Patreon) to information, entertainment, and social media platforms (e.g. Google, Netflix, YouTube, Instagram). Alongside this process of 'platformisation', labour platforms have emerged as infrastructures for the posting and intermediation of paid work tasks. It is estimated that there are currently 28 million platform workers in Europe[7], with projections suggesting this number will rise to 43 million by 2025[8]. In Germany, based on the JRC COLLEEM II survey, it is estimated that there are approximately 2.5 million regular platform workers, which corresponds to 5.7 percent of the workforce.

While platform work is often associated with labour platforms that mediate work tasks, it encompasses much more[9]. In particular, social media platforms are gaining prominence in the monetisation of tasks—such as live-streaming on platforms like Twitch or influencing via Instagram—leading to broader interpretations of what constitutes platform work. Our study adopts this expansive perspective on platform work[10].

Although the term "platform work" serves as an umbrella term for all types of platform-mediated and platform-enabled work activities, platform labour markets comprise heterogeneous forms of work. First, platforms vary based on whether the work is performed directly on the platform (as in the case of content creation on social media platforms) or whether the

[7] It should not be ignored here, that estimates in this regard vary notably due to differences in methods, definitions and operationalisations (Piasna 2021). This is also true for Germany (Rosenbohm and Hoose 2022: 326).

[8] European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document. Consultation document. Second phase consultation of social partners under Article 154 TFEU on a possible action addressing the challenges related to working conditions in platform work, SWD (2021)143 final), 2021.

[9] M. Kenney, J. Zysman, *The platform economy: restructuring the space of capitalist accumulation*, in Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 2020, vol. 13, 55-76.

[10] A. Garcia Calvo, M. Kenney, J. Zysman, *Understanding work in the online platform economy: the narrow, the broad and the systemic perspectives*, in Industrial and Corporate Change, 2023, 1-20.

S. Rosenbohm, F. Hoose, *Ambivalences of platform work: the gig economy in Germany*, in I. Ness (ed.), The Routledge Handbook of the Gig Economy, Routledge, London, New York, 2022, 324–336.

work is merely mediated through the platform (as is typical of established labour platforms)[11]. Second, different segments within the platform labour market operate in distinct ways: some are demand-driven, where tasks are assigned to individuals based on algorithmic management or competitive bidding, while others are supply-driven, allowing platform workers to create their own demand, particularly in the attention economy of social media platforms[12].

Third, the nature of work executed in the platform economy differs with respect to skill level. Micro tasks and macro tasks are often seen as the opposing poles; the former consists of simple tasks such as labelling and filing, while the latter encompasses knowledge-intensive and/or creative projects, ranging from software development to consulting and design. This distinction has important implications for working hours and income opportunities: micro tasks typically offer low wages and are short-term, whereas macro tasks often involve extended projects and higher pay.

Fourth, platform work also varies concerning the degree of digitalisation. While much of platform work is conducted entirely online, there are also platform-mediated activities that take place in specific locations (e.g. delivery or ride-hailing services). Fifth, it is essential to distinguish whether platform work is performed as the primary job and the main source of income, or—empirically evident in all Western countries—whether it acts as moonlighting alongside a primary job[13]. In Germany, for instance, only about 1.5 percent of the working-age population engages in platform work as their main job.

2.1 Work organisation and working conditions

The various sectors of the platform economy outlined above and the different ways in which platform work is utilised by platform workers significantly impact the forms of work organisation and working conditions that can be observed. The conditions under which platform work is conducted are largely determined by the platform enterprises themselves. They dictate who gains access to the platform-orchestrated markets, establish the terms under which market activities take place, and

[11] A. Piasna et al., *op. cit.*

[12] F. Hoose, S. Rosenbohm, *op. cit.*

[13] M. C. Urzì Brancati et al., *op. cit.*
A. Piasna et al., *op. cit.*

implement specific mechanisms for organising, managing, and controlling work on the platform[14].

There exists a variety of mechanisms by which tasks are allocated: while open calls operate on a 'first come, first served' basis, competitive mechanisms also exist, with platform workers applying for specific jobs or tasks—often macro tasks in the form of projects. The latter constitutes a 'winner-takes-all' mechanism, posing the risk of investing unpaid hours. In many segments of the platform labour markets, digital technologies employed by platform companies play a crucial role in work organisation. Previous research has highlighted the significance of algorithmic management[15],, which is used to control the work process[16] and is often combined with various forms of reputation systems[17], leading to information and power asymmetries as well as 'lock-in effects.'[18].

Not only is there diversity among the platforms, their business models, and digital infrastructures, but the platform workers themselves are also heterogeneous. On one hand, there are precarious (pseudo) self-employed individuals undertaking simple, low-paying tasks; on the other hand, highly qualified freelancers are presented with lucrative and complex projects. Piasna et al. (2022) provide further insights into the socio-economic composition of platform workers: they tend to be younger and possess a higher level of formal education than the 'offline workforce,' especially in the case of those platform workers who operate as creative freelancers.

What most platform workers have in common is their status as independent contractors or solo self-employed individuals. Despite their structuring roles, (labour) platforms have—except in the case of delivery and ride-hailing platforms that have adopted alternative contractual

[14] S. Kirchner, *Arbeiten in der Plattformökonomie: Grundlagen und Grenzen von „Cloudwork" und „Gigwork",* in Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, 2019, vol. 71, 3-25.

[15] N. Koutsimpogiorgos, J. van Slageren, A. M. Herrmann, K. Frenken, *Conceptualizing the Gig Economy and Its Regulatory Problems*, in Policy & Internet, 2020, 1-21.

[16] J. Haidar, M. Keune, *Work and Labour Relations in Global Platform Capitalism*, in J. Haidar, M. Keune (eds.), ILERA Publication series. Work and labour relations in global platform capitalism, Edward Elgar, ILO, 2021, 1–27.

[17] D. Stark, I. Pais, *Algorithmic Management in the Platform Economy*, in Sociologica*,* 2020, vol. 14, no. 3, 47-72.

[18] U. Dolata, J.-F. Schrape, *Plattform Architectures. The Structuration of Platform Companies on the Internet. Research Contributions to Organizational Sociology and Innovation Studies*, Discussion Paper 2022-01, 2022.

arrangements[19]—successfully denied employer status to date. Consequently, approximately nine out of ten tasks in the European Union are carried out under an 'independent service provision' model, i.e., (solo) self-employment[20]. Since the majority of platform workers are not employees, they lack integration into employee-centred labour market and welfare state institutions. In labour law, self-employment is treated differently from dependent employment. As a result, most platform workers do not have access to institutionally anchored collective representation of interests, such as works councils. Their options for utilising trade unions are also limited: while unions can provide advice for the self-employed on platforms and thus attempt to create incentives for union membership, they are formally prohibited from signing collective agreements if platform workers are officially self-employed[21].

The mostly non-existent employee status also leads to potential risks concerning the social security of platform workers. As self-employed individuals, platform workers are typically not integrated into statutory social insurance schemes. This is particularly true within the employee-centred German welfare regime, where institutionalised social protection is closely linked to formal dependent employment[22]. The majority of platform workers do not have access to social protection institutions through their platform work. According to Joyce et al.[23] (2019: 172), between 68 and 82 per cent of those platform workers relying on this source of income lack access to social security schemes, except for health insurance. Berg (2016) indicates that 90 per cent of micro-taskers on Amazon Mechanical Turk do not contribute to social security schemes. This low level of social security has been corroborated by other surveys comparing different countries[24]. In Germany, previous research reveals a

[19] J. Ewen, *Schluss mit ausgeliefert? Tarifpolitik in der plattformvermittelten Lieferarbeit*, PROKLA, Zeitschrift für Kritische Sozialwissenschaft, 2023, vol. 53, no. 211.
V. Niebler, G. Pirina, M. Secchi, F. Tomassoni, *Towards 'bogus employment?' The contradictory outcomes of ride-hailing regulation in Berlin, Lisbon and Paris*, in Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 2023, online first: https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsad007.
[20] W. P. de Groen, Z. Kilhoffer, L. Westhoff, D. Postica, F. Shamsfakhr, *Digital labour platforms in the EU. Mapping and business models. Final Report*, CEPS, Luxembourg, 2021.
[21] T. Haipeter, F. Hoose, *Plattformökonomie in Deutschland*, in IAQ-Forschung 04/2023, 2023.
[22] F. Beckmann, F. Hoose, *op. cit.*
B. Riedmüller, T. Olk, *Grenzen des Sozialversicherungsstaates*, Leviathan Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen, 1994.
[23] S. Joyce, M. Stuart, C. Forde, D. Valizade, *Work and Social Protection in the Platform Economy in Europe*, in Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations, 2019, vol. 25, 153-184.
[24] International Labor Organization (ILO), *The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work*, ILO, Geneva, 2021.

similar trend, with protection against unemployment or loss of earnings and old age being particularly precarious[25].
The employment status of platform workers also impacts their income. As self-employed, platform workers cannot leverage collective bargaining to secure more reliable incomes or reduce their dependence on individual bargaining power[26]. Previous research regarding pay indicates significant variability among platform workers. While those performing high-skilled macro tasks can realise substantial earnings—sometimes hourly wages exceeding 100 euros[27] —click workers often earn only 1 to 5 euros per hour[28]. Moreover, non-transparent payment models and instances of promised payments being withheld by the platform are also problematic.[29]
The working hours of platform workers are likewise considered potentially precarious. Although empirical investigations highlight the flexibility of working hours as a primary motivation for engaging in platform work, it is also noted that platform workers report longer working hours than regular employees and tend to work more frequently on weekends and at night[30]. This phenomenon can largely be attributed to the fact that many platform workers have a primary job and therefore conduct platform work outside their designated working hours. Last but not least, platform work often results in volatile participation in employment and carries the risk of income loss due to absent or poorly compensated tasks. For individuals who undertake platform work sporadically and those not reliant on this source of income, such risks may not be of significant concern. However, the structural insecurity inherent in the organisation of platform work can pose considerable challenges for

[25] J. M. Leimeister, D. Durward, S. Zogaj, *Crowd Worker in Deutschland. Eine empirische Studie zum Arbeitsumfeld auf externen Crowdsourcing-Plattformen*, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, Düsseldorf, 2016.
I. Bertschek, J. Ohnemus, S. Viete, *Befragung zum sozioökonomischen Hintergrund und zu den Motiven von Crowdworkern: Endbericht zur Kurzexpertise für das Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales*, Zentrum für Europäische Wirtschaftsforschung GmbH (ZEW), Mannheim, 2016.
[26] F. Hoose, T. Haipeter, *op. cit.*
[27] L. Hünefeld, S.-C. Meyer, N. Backhaus, *Digitalization of Employment: Working via Online Platforms*, in C. Korunka (ed.), Flexible Working Practices and Approaches. Psychological and Social Implications, Springer Internationale Publishing, Cham, 2021, 167-190.
[28] C. Freudenberg, W. Schulz-Weidner, I. Wölfle, *Soziale Sicherung von Plattformarbeit im internationalen Vergleich - Gute Praxis und Handlungsoptionen für Deutschland*, in Zeitschrift Deutsche Rentenversicherung, 2019, vol. 4, 365-398.
[29] P. Stewart, G. Shanahan, M. Smith, *Individualism and Collectivism at Work in an Era of Deindustrialization: Work Narratives of Food Delivery Couriers in the Platform Economy,* in Frontiers in Sociology, 2020, vol. 5, 1-14.
[30] M. C. Urzì Brancati et al., *op. cit.*

those for whom money from the next job is essential for subsistence[31]. Frequently, various risks accumulate and become entrenched over time, as the established institutions that regulate work and provide social protection for workers are lacking in many segments of the platform labour markets.
The working conditions outlined above have led to diagnoses of precarious working environments within the platform economy[32]. While the effects of the work organisation of platform work have been extensively explored, knowledge regarding the motivations of platform workers is much more limited[33]. This raises the question of why individuals expose themselves to this form of short-term and unreliable income in the first place, and how they perceive their working conditions in the platform economy.

2.2 Motivations for working on platforms

The still incomplete state of research on the motivations of platform workers supports the assumption that there exists a wide range of individual motivations and interests for engaging in this type of work, even in the face of sometimes problematic working conditions[34]. Interests in exciting work content, learning new skills, and the desire for flexible and customisable work are often reasons for consciously accepting the uncertainties associated with platform work. According to Al-Ani and

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[31] J. Meijerink, A. Keegan, T. Bondarouk, *Having their cake and eating it too? Online labor platforms and human resource management as a case of institutional complexity*, in International Journal of Human Resource Management, 2021, 4016-4052.
[32] T. Montgomery, S. Baglioni, *Defining the gig economy: platform capitalism and the reinvention of precarious work*, in International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 2021, vol. 41, 1012-1025.
[33] J. Torrent-Sellens, P. Ficapal-Cusí, M. Ertz, *'Motivations for Labour Provision on Digital Platforms in Europe: Examinig the Differences Between Only Gigers and Gigers and Renters'*, in M. Ertz (ed.), Handbook of research on the platform economy and the evolution of e-commerce, Hershey, IGI Global Business Science Reference, PA, 2022, p. 93.
[34] A. L. Kalleberg, S. Vallas, *Probing precarious work: Theory, research, and politics*, in A. L. Kalleberg, S. P. Vallas (ed.), Precarious Work: Causes, Characteristics, and Consequences, Emerald, Bingley, 2018, 1–30.
D. Durward, I. Blohm, J. M. Leimeister, T*he Nature of Crowd Work and its Effects on Individuals' Work Perception*, in Journal of Management Information Systems, 2020, vol. 37, no. 1, 66–95.
R. Brewer, M. Ringel, A. M. Piper, *"Why would anybody do this?": Older Adults' Understanding of and Experiences with Crowd Work*, in CHI '16: Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2016, 2246-2257.

Stumpp[35] (2016), labour platforms deliberately rely on a mode of equal participation by platform workers, giving them the impression that they can play a significant role in shaping the work outcomes they produce. In this way, work-mediating platforms emulate the practices of peer-to-peer platforms such as Wikipedia[36]: Conversely, fewer platforms promise good earning opportunities; particularly if such promises are not realised, they could prove demotivating for the work performance of platform workers[37].

Working conditions in the platform economy, especially in sectors where more complex and higher-skilled jobs are performed, exhibit similarities to those found in atypical employment, as discussed elsewhere. This is particularly the case in the creative industries, where working conditions can often be described as precarious and characterised by instability, low pay, and limited working hours[38]. Nevertheless, workers in these fields remain highly motivated in their employment: they are engaged and feel a strong connection to the content of their work. Creative workers often express satisfaction with their roles due to their intrinsic motivation; they desire to express themselves creatively and are thus willing to accept these working conditions[39]. Similar ambivalences have been reported in creative platform work: while working as a content creator can be demanding, it also fulfils personal desires for creativity, enjoyment, and self-fulfilment[40].

Since platform work is predominantly undertaken as a part-time job (at least in Europe), working hours have become more flexible and fragmented, resulting in increasingly blurred lines between work and leisure time. This flexibility and the heightened scope for self-determination are precisely what make working in the platform economy attractive. Research on the motives behind multiple jobholding indicates

[35] A. Al-Ani, S. Stumpp, *Rebalancing interests and power structures on crowdworking platforms,* in Internet Policy Review, 2016, vol. 5, no. 2, 1-19.

[36] F. Hoose, P.-F. Kramer, (forthcoming), *Stories About Crowdwork – Analysis of the Self-Representation of Crowdwork Platforms on the Internet*, in management revue.

[37] D. Durward et al., *op. cit.*

[38] A. Manske, *Kapitalistische Geister in der Kultur- und Kreativwirtschaft. Kreative zwischen wirtschaftlichem Zwang und künstlerischem Drang*, transcript, Bielefeld, 2016.

A. McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2016.

[39] H. Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008.

A. Manske, *op. cit.*

[40] B. E. Duffy, E. Wissinger, *Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and "Just Being Me"*, in International Journal of Communication*,* 2017, vol. 11, 4652-4671.

F. Hoose, S. Rosenbohm, *Self-representation as platform work: Stories about working as social media content creators*, in Convergence, 2023, vol. 0, no. 0, 1–17.

that these motivations extend beyond the prospect of additional earnings; other aspects may include "required hours, safety, interest, and task variety."[41]
In summary, platform workers exhibit extremely heterogeneous employment constellations and individually varied motivations, interests, and employment-related strategies. Accordingly, the views and needs of platform workers with regard to questions surrounding the regulation of platform work and the collective representation of interests may also differ. How the 'objective' working conditions in the platform economy are reflected in workers' 'subjective' perceptions, how they perceive their work, and what demands they have regarding regulation and representation. We assume that these interests and demands are highly individualised. This raises questions about whether collectively shared interests regarding regulatory measures can be identified in the platform economy and whether there is a desire for collective interest representation and solidarity among platform workers. Before addressing these questions using our own data, we first explore existing research on issues of regulation and representation within the platform economy.

3. Platform Work: De- and Re-institutionalisation

Institutions structure social life and 'programme' social action by conveying certain expectations of behaviour alongside common values and norms[42]. Social institutions also play a significant role in structuring labour markets and defining the conditions of work and employment, providing a fixed point for the subjective orientations of working individuals[43]. In conservative welfare states such as Germany, institutional regulation of employment—through mechanisms like social insurance schemes and collective bargaining—plays a prominent role in protecting workers against market and social risks, thereby reducing the power asymmetry between capital and labour.
Labour market and welfare state institutions serve an orientating function, determining which forms of work are perceived as 'normal' and outlining the requirements for protection against work-related risks. In Germany and other Western countries, standard employment relationships (SER)—defined as permanent, dependent employment embedded within welfare

[41] M. H. Doucette, W. D. Bradford, *Dual Job Holding and the Gig Economy: Allocation of Effort across Primary and Gig Jobs,* in Southern Economic Journal, 2019, vol. 85, no. 4, 1219
[42] C. Offe, *Institutionen, Normen, Bürgertugenden*, Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 2019.
[43] F. Beckmann, F. Spohr, *Arbeitsmarkt und Arbeitsmarktpolitik. Grundlagen, Wandel, Zukunftsperspektiven*, UVK Verlag, München, 2022.

institutions—have long set the empirical and desirable norm for what constitutes work, providing a reference point for atypical forms of employment. 'Regular' forms of work are supported by solidarity-based, albeit selective, institutionalised insurance schemes that protect workers from social risks, such as those arising from illness or unemployment. Ultimately, it is the collective organisation and representation of workers' interests that distinguishes this work-structuring institution. It was only through the association of workers in the form of trade unions, among other organisations, that significant regulatory frameworks concerning work—particularly regarding social security—were established.
However, this institutionalised norm has come under pressure[44]. There is now a multitude of new, atypical forms of employment (e.g., marginal employment, solo self-employment) that neither fit the logic of standard work nor can be easily integrated into welfare state and labour market institutions, thus producing greater social risks than standard employment.

3.1 De-Institutionalisation

Platform work can be considered the latest manifestation of a trend towards the de-institutionalisation of labour. Unlike forms of institutional change in which rules are either completely replaced or partially modified[45], de-institutionalisation is a process in which "rules are being abandoned without being replaced by some alternative institutional pattern"[46] (original emphasis). As discussed above, in Western countries, the institutions regulating labour and offering social protection developed in the 19th century and were based on ideas about 'normal' work in the context of industrial labour. Thus, labour that ought to be regulated was understood as occupational work performed in firms outside the private household, within the framework of dependent employment relationships governed by an employment contract[47].
Platform work breaks with these conditions. Often, access to the market is low-threshold and hardly regulated by occupational certificates. The presence of physical firms and interaction with colleagues is as rare as the existence of employment contracts. This de-institutionalised work arrangement leads to a shift in regulation to the individual level—a process that Dukes and Streeck (2022) consider prototypical for the

[44] R. Dukes, W. Streeck, *op. cit.*
[45] W. Streeck, K. Thelen, *Beyond continuity: Institutional change in advanced political economies*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
[46] C. Offe, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
[47] C. Offe, *op. cit.*

development of labour law and regulation since the neoliberal shift in the 1980s. This individualisation of labour regulation exacerbates the power asymmetry between platform enterprises and platform workers—particularly as many platform workers possess limited structural and organisational power[48]. While structural power resources are low since many platform workers are easily replaceable—even highly qualified workers with specific knowledge—the high degree of anonymity resulting from "de-companyisation" impedes collective interest representation[49].
Previous research has documented how platform enterprises promote de-institutionalisation—both from a functional perspective by utilising self-employment and from a normative perspective by presenting themselves as unconventional labour market actors that innovate rigid employment structures[50]. Consequently, platform work is idealised as autonomous work beyond 'regular' employment and as an opportunity for personal growth and entrepreneurship. At the same time, platform workers are highly heterogeneous[51] with respect to socio-demographics, life phases, (labour market) status, employment patterns, and motivations for engaging in platform work[52]. Not only do opportunities for income generation and actual earnings differ significantly, but platform work also serves various individual functions: for some, it is a sporadic or temporary opportunity to earn (extra) money; for others, it may represent the only chance to participate in paid work, whilst a growing digital avant-garde uses platform work as a primary source of income[53]. Accordingly, there is considerable diversity of interests among platform workers, accompanied by differing degrees of willingness to articulate those interests collectively. Nevertheless, empirical investigations into representation and organisational preferences among platform workers remain scarce.

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[48] P. Lorig, F. Gnisa, *Interessen, Machtressourcen und kollektive Organisierung in Crowd- und Gigwork*, in J. Ewen, S. Nies, M. Seeliger (eds.), Arbeit – Organisation – Politik. Sozialpartnerschaft im digitalisierten Kapitalismus: Hat der institutionalisierte Klassenkompromiss eine Zukunft?, Beltz Juventa, Weinheim, Munich, 2022, 124-144.
[49] F. Nullmeier, *The Structural Adaptability of Bismarckian Social Insurance Systems in the Digital Age*, in M. R. Busemeyer, A. Kemmerling, P. Marx, K. van Kersbergen (eds.), Digitalization and the Welfare State, Oxford University Press, 2022, 290-303.
[50] J. Schor, S. Vallas, *The Sharing Economy: Rhetoric and Reality*, in Annual Review of Sociology, 2021, vol. 47, no. 1, 369–389, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-082620-031411.
F. Beckmann and F. Hoose, *op. cit.*
[51] J. Haidar, M. Keune, *op. cit.*
[52] A. Piasna et al., *op. cit.*
[53] M. Dunn, *Making gigs work: digital platforms, job quality and worker motivations*, in New Technology, Work and Employment, 2020, vol. 35, no. 2, 232-249.

3.2 (Challenges of) Re-Institutionalisation

Due to the potential for precarious working conditions and the considerable power of platform enterprises, platform work has become a focus of social and labour policy debates, particularly concerning (supra-)national collective regulation. In terms of legislative oversight, platform work is currently not well regulated by national policies. However, some nations, such as France, Belgium, and Uruguay, have made early efforts towards transparent information transfer, which provides an important foundation for potential further regulation[54]. Nevertheless, the primary issue remains that national regulations are often ignored or undermined by platforms with foreign headquarters, resulting in a transnational "cat and mouse" game[55]. This has increased the importance of supranational regulatory efforts, primarily those initiated by the European Commission.
A significant milestone has been the proposal for a directive from the European Parliament and the Council aimed at improving working conditions in platform work. This proposal, in its various stages, not only demands more transparency regarding the algorithms used by platforms but also seeks to address the misclassification of platform workers by reclassifying them as workers, thereby granting access to employee-related protections, such as social insurance.
While the efforts made by the European Commission are commendable in terms of detailed content, the political process is lengthy, and the scope remains vague. The proposal itself states: "As a result of actions to address the risk of misclassification, between 1.72 million and 4.1 million people are expected to be reclassified as workers (circa 2.35 million on-location and 1.75 million online, considering the higher estimation figures)"[56]. Given the estimated 28 million platform workers in the European Union at the time of the initial proposal in 2021, this reclassification would affect approximately 6 to 14 per cent of platform workers. This discrepancy arises because many platform workers do not meet the potential criteria for bogus self-employment. Chesalina points out that many platform workers are not solely dependent on platforms, but on various clients for whom they work. Moreover, the vast majority work for multiple clients; the relationships between clients and platform

[54] C. Freudenberg et al., *op. cit.*
[55] T. Scholz, *Uberworked and underpaid: How workers are disrupting the digital economy,* Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2017.
[56] European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document. Consultation document. Second phase consultation of social partners under Article 154 TFEU on a possible action addressing the challenges related to working conditions in platform work*, SWD (2021)143 final), 2021, 12.

workers are typically short-term, temporary, and volatile, with many platform workers actively using multiple platforms.
In addition to these activities at the European level, numerous initiatives have emerged, aiming to regulate platform work and enable collective representation of platform workers' interests. In Germany, these initiatives vary significantly concerning the actors involved and the degree of institutionalisation. Four ideal types can be distinguished:
First, some platform enterprises have made self-regulatory efforts. An example is the self-committing Code of Conduct titled "Principles for Paid Crowdsourcing/Crowdworking - Guidelines for Profitable and Fair Cooperation between Crowdsourcing Companies and Crowdworkers," which was signed in October 2017 by the CEOs of several platforms.
Second, there have been protests in certain segments of the platform economy—most notably in the food delivery sector—driven by bottom-up initiatives initiated by platform workers without any support from traditional unions. These efforts sometimes include strikes and collaborations with autonomous left-wing associations.
Third, in the same food delivery sector, successful processes of institutionalisation have occurred on some platforms, particularly Lieferando, where numerous works councils have been established in recent years. While these examples are highlighted as best practices demonstrating that regulation through worker mobilisation is possible, it is important to note that they are exceptional, as 'riders' are employed directly by the platforms, fundamentally differing from the majority of formally self-employed platform workers.
Lastly, there are initiatives exploring new ways to organise platform workers and exert pressure on platforms. One such example is 'Fair Crowd Work', an online platform launched by the German IG Metall union in cooperation with unions from Austria, Sweden, the UK, and the US, aiming to rebalance power by allowing platform workers to rate platforms based on criteria such as transparency, fairness, and working conditions[57]. Another initiative is the 'Youtubers Union', which was established in early 2018 in response to growing dissatisfaction among YouTuber content creators regarding platform regulations[58]. Since July 2019, this initiative has been supported by the trade union IG Metall, which has jointly launched the 'FairTube' campaign to enhance the

[57] T. Haipeter, F. Hoose, *Interessenvertretung bei Crowd- und Gigwork. Initiativen zur Regulierung von Plattformarbeit in Deutschland*, in IAQ-Report 05/2019, 2019.
[58] V. Niebler, *'YouTubers unite': collective action by YouTube content creators*, in Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 2020, vol. 26, 223-227.
Hoose & Haipeter 2021: 169.

transparency and accountability of decisions made by the YouTube platform[59]
While Fair Crowd Work and FairTube serve as innovative examples of advocacy, their levels of institutionalisation and the presence of binding legal agreements remain low. Nonetheless, they effectively leverage societal power resources to pressure platforms and promote transparency in business and work organisation models.

3.3 Unknowns about the collective dimension

Summarising the previous initiatives, it is clear that the primary strategy for regulation—whether at the EU level or within national industrial relations—is the integration of platform work into the established institutions of labour regulation and interest representation. As discussed, this strategy has seen partial success in segments of platform labour where platform workers are employed directly by the platforms and where physical firms exist. In contrast, in other cases—particularly various online-based crowd work segments—the approaches to regulation are much less institutionalised, with unions attempting either to exert pressure on platform enterprises or to encourage them to cooperate for improved working conditions.
However, previous research has only marginally illuminated the representation demands and perceived working conditions of platform workers engaged in these location-independent, online forms of platform work. This is problematic not only because this group constitutes the majority of platform workers but also because potential interest representation faces greater challenges due to the heightened social, spatial, and organisational disembeddedness of their work. This is where our study comes in.
On one hand, we examine the interests of online platform workers regarding their work: What demands do these workers have concerning their activities on platforms, and what challenges do they perceive regarding their working conditions? On the other hand, we investigate whether there are shared demands among platform workers regarding the regulation of their working conditions and, if so, what these demands entail. In other words, do they express a need for regulation, and who should represent their interests accordingly?

[59] IG Metall, Presseinformation: *IG Metall und YouTubers Union vereinbaren Zusammenarbeit: Gemeinschaftsprojekt für faire Arbeitsbedingungen im Bereich Video-Crowdworking*, 2019 (Available: https://www.igmetall.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/ig-metall-youtubers-union-vereinbaren-zusammenarbeit).

While little is known about the representation and regulatory preferences of this group of platform workers, it is likely that such preferences and demands vary across different subgroups of online platform workers. Arguably, like other highly qualified self-employed individuals[60], professional platform workers with high earnings are likely to favour individual representation and value autonomy and opportunities for self-efficacy. Financial dependency is another plausible factor influencing individual interest formation: as many platform workers utilise platform work as a source of supplementary income, regulatory preferences may be minimal in instances where platform work is executed sporadically or where generated platform income is low. Above all, it remains an open question to what extent platform workers actually perceive their relationship with the platforms as conflictual and, consequently, articulate a necessity for regulation—this perception seems to depend significantly on the interests and strategies that workers pursue through platform work.

4. Methodology and Data

The data presented in this analysis is based firstly on an online survey conducted in December 2022 among platform self-employed individuals living in Germany (n = 719). This survey was part of the research project "Platform Economy and Social Security (PlaSoSi)," funded by the FIS-network of the German Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS). For this quantitative survey, an online access panel was used to recruit respondents. According to the broader conception of platform work outlined in Chapter 2, all respondents in our sample have used the internet or an app in the past 12 months to earn money by either (1) renting out an apartment, (2) selling self-made, used, or new products (excluding personal possessions), (3) accepting paid tasks arranged through an online platform, and/or (4) creating original content on social media platforms. Additionally, respondents were required to indicate whether they performed this work as self-employed, meaning only platform workers who stated they did not have an employment contract with a platform company were included in the sample.

[60] B. Apitzsch, C. Ruiner, M. Wilkesmann, *Zur Rolle von neuen und klassischen intermediären Akteuren in den Arbeitswelten hochqualifizierter Solo-Selbständiger*, in Industrielle Beziehungen, 2016, vol. 23, no. 4, 477-497.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents in the quantitative sample

Gender	
Female	36 %
Male	64 %
Age	
<20	3.1 %
20 < 30	16.4 %
30 < 40	33.8 %
40 < 50	23.2 %
50 < 60	12.7 %
60 < 70	7.1 %
70 <	3.8 %
Occupational qualification	
No professional qualification	3.5 %
Still in training	5.6 %
Professional qualification	42.6 %
Academic degree	46.9 %
Significance of platform work	
Main job	10.8 %
Side job	32.2 %
Sporadically (neither main nor side job)	57 %

Source: Own calculation and visualization; n=719

Secondly, the data is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with platform workers derived from two different studies. However, since the interviews in both studies covered similar questions regarding the issues of regulation and representation in the platform economy, and the interviewees were active in similar areas of online platform work, we decided to combine the material from both studies to enrich the data for the analysis presented in this paper. One part of the qualitative data stems from a PhD project[61], in which ten interviews with platform workers were conducted in 2020. For the current study, the focus was on eight of these interviews. The platform workers came from Western European countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) with relatively similar structures regarding

[61] P.-F. Kramer, *Mehr als nur ein Zeitvertreib. Arbeitsorientierungen und Erwerbsprojekte von Plattformarbeitenden*, Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 2024.

welfare state institutions and labour regulation. The sample includes[62]. individuals working as (solo) self-employed in various areas of online platform work. The figures indicate the number of interviewees according to their main areas of platform work: Design (4), Freelancing (mainly IT) (2), Clickwork (software testing) (2). Notably, some of the interviewees were engaged in more than one area of platform work. The other part of the qualitative data was obtained as part of the PlaSoSi project. In an ongoing data collection, 18 interviews with self-employed individuals were conducted between March and August 2023. The interviewees are self-employed in four different areas of the platform economy: Content Creation via social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, etc. (5), Freelancing (mainly IT) (6), Clickwork (particularly software testing) (5), and Domestic Services (2). Unlike the key characteristics of our quantitative sample, a larger proportion of the interviewees in our qualitative sample engage in platform work as their main job or integrate it as a stable part of their individual employment arrangements. This is significant for the further analysis, as a greater number of the platform workers interviewed appear to be more or less dependent on their platform activities, making the issues of regulation and representation raised in our research particularly important.

All interviews were analysed using the method of thematic coding[63]. The categories of our coding scheme focused on the demands and interests of workers regarding their platform activity and how they perceive their working conditions on one hand (e.g., demand for flexibility, striving for self-determination, concerns about insecure employment conditions) and workers' demands and needs regarding regulation and representation on the other (e.g., demand for social security, need for support from collective actors). The coding scheme was further complemented by categories emerging from our interview material during the coding process. Since we focus on platform workers' subjective perceptions, we will present and discuss excerpts from our qualitative data at various points throughout the presentation of the results[64].

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[62] Two interviewees from the broader PhD-Sample came from Bulgaria resp. Australia; in order to ensure the comparability, these cases were not included in the current study.

[63] C. Hopf, C. Schmidt, *Zum Verhältnis von innerfamilialen sozialen Erfahrungen, Persönlichkeitsentwicklung und politischen Orientierungen: Dokumentation und Erörterung des methodischen Vorgehens in einer Studie zu diesem Thema*, Universität Hildesheim, Hildesheim, 1993.

[64] Interview-excerpts coming from the PhD-project are referred to as coming from 'Study A'; interview-excerpts coming from the 'PlaSoSi'-project are referred to as coming from 'Study B'.

5. Empirical findings

5.1 Findings (I): Working conditions and employment strategies of platform workers

As discussed in Section 2, the working conditions experienced by platform workers vary notably depending on the segment of the platform economy in which they operate. While there are clear differences, for example, in perceptions of occupational safety between those who work locally (e.g., workers in domestic services) and those who work strictly digitally (e.g., content creators), there appear to be several common denominators in how platform workers perceive their working conditions — regardless of whether they work locally or digitally, or, for that matter, carry out micro-tasks or macro-tasks. One commonality observed in this context is the perception of extensive flexibility within the conditions of platform work. The vast majority of respondents consider it an advantage to work outside regular office hours and to choose the types of tasks they wish to undertake.

Indications of this flexibility can be found in the quantitative data: around 76 per cent of our 719 respondents agree with the statement, "I like that in platform work, I am my own boss," and approximately 82 per cent agree with the statement, "to me, platform work offers flexible working hours." Not only is there a perception of high levels of flexibility, but there is also a shared demand for autonomy that is evident among nearly all interviewees. A high-earning IT freelancer, who points out that the majority of IT freelancers are financially secure and therefore do not need to worry about a lack of social security, succinctly describes this demand for flexibility and autonomy as "not ever wanting to run into dependencies" (Freelancer 1, Sample B). It is the independence and potential for self-determination that drive platform workers, as highlighted by one interviewed clickworker. He has made platform work an integral part of his solo self-employment, which spans three pillars across different areas of activity, emphasising the potential for self-determination as a key driver:

> "Sure, it's comfortable [at this point, a standard employment relationship is meant], and in some jobs you would certainly earn more. But that's not what motivates me. It's not the salary or the potential to earn money. It's the variety and the freedom, let's say, to organise it the way I want." (Clickworker 1, Sample A)

Thus, the relatively high agreement with the statement of being 'one's own boss' can be interpreted as a largely successful realisation of demands

for autonomy within self-employed platform work among our respondents.
However, paradoxically, this demanded and perceived autonomy coexists with a sense of dependency, which interviewees associate with the algorithmic management of the platforms. Interviewees describe 'the algorithm' as a "law of nature, which you cannot do anything against" (Content Creator 1, Sample B) and as a "secret of the platform" (Clickworker 2, Sample A)—alluding to the power asymmetry between platform enterprises and platform workers that was discussed earlier in this paper. This situation is particularly serious because algorithms control workers' access to jobs and customers based on data concerning their previous performance (e.g., number of orders, customer ratings). Consequently, the platforms and the algorithmic forms of control they implement also shape workers' income prospects. This often results in uncertainties and precarious work situations, as workers feel compelled to accept every job they can get (even if it is poorly paid) to improve their performance—as described by a 22-year-old interviewee who works on a testing platform and aims to earn money while studying, thereby feeling dependent on the (algorithmically supported) rating systems:

> "Well, as I said, the job invitations depend on what rating you have. At the beginning, you have the problem that you don't get invitations because you have a bad rating. But because you don't receive invitations, you can't improve your rating. That's how it is. And to get out of it, it's advisable to accept every invitation you get and do good work so that your rating improves and you get better projects." (Clickworker 2, Sample A)

However, uncertainties related to job offers and payments do not only arise from algorithmic management. Most interviewees expressed feelings of uncertainty due to perceptions of high fluctuations in pay. To illustrate this, a case example shall be presented. One interviewee, who began content creation as a side job and, after gaining more attention on social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, and TikTok, quit her job as a product manager in IT to become a full-time content creator, alludes to the uncertainties of the attention economy that she personally experiences:

> "And the problem with Twitch is that you are very dependent on how many subscriptions people leave or how much money they donate. You can be super popular for a while, but then many people may unsubscribe and stop donating, which makes it very uncertain to rely on just one source of income, especially when it depends on whether people like you

> and what the current economy is like? […] The payments are just very irregular." (Content Creator 4, Sample B)

The dissatisfaction with the irregularity of pay is not only reflected in the case of this particular content creator but is evident among the vast majority of interviewees. However, the same cannot be said regarding dissatisfaction with the amount of pay received for their platform work. In fact, while overall satisfaction with pay was quite high among interviewees, the group of clickworkers interviewed was a distinct exception, as they reported dissatisfaction with task pay rates, which they perceived as rather low. One interviewee, who works as an engineer and thus earns a relatively high wage in his main job, stated:

> "I'm not just going by the money now. I say that honestly. The whole thing is just not worth it for that. […] If someone is looking for big money, then they are on the wrong platform" [alluding to the testing platform he regularly uses]. (Clickworker 1, Sample B)

This dissatisfaction with pay amount is, in the respondents' perception, somewhat offset by the fact that none of the clickworkers in interview samples A or B undertake their platform tasks as a main job. Only Clickworker 2 from Sample A describes that he temporarily earned a living from platform work; currently, his activities on a testing platform are a side job. Instead, they approach it as an avocation or a side job that provides them with a "nice little extra income" (Clickworker 2, Sample B), as one interviewee expressed, noting that his primary focus is on his medical studies, and he deliberately restricts himself to side jobs that do not detract significantly from his studies. This is also reflected in the quantitative data: only 11 per cent of our respondents engage in platform work as their primary job, while around 32 per cent treat platform work as a regular side job, and 57 per cent undertake it neither as a regular main nor side job, but rather as sporadic work. Additionally, only 16 per cent of those surveyed engage in platform work on a daily basis. Just 17.5 per cent of respondents indicate that they absolutely need earnings from platform work to make a living, while the vast majority consider income from platform work as either negligible for subsistence or, again, as a welcome supplement to their income from 'regular' work. Furthermore, while they may focus their efforts on one platform, clickworkers typically undertake testing tasks on multiple platforms (or at least have created profiles on several platforms).

This strategy of using multiple platforms can also be observed among the other groups of self-employed platform workers we interviewed. While IT

freelancers engage with multiple platforms to increase their visibility and broaden their client bases, content creators seek to distribute their content across as many social media platforms and channels as possible to enhance their searchability. The ability for workers to build and expand their client networks through these platforms is regarded as the "best and most important thing" (Designer 1, Sample A), as stated by a worker from a design platform. Thus, by generating more income opportunities and enhancing profile visibility and searchability, the strategy of utilising multiple platforms can be interpreted not only as a means to counteract dependence on one specific platform but also highlights that platform work is more than just an informal side line or a negligible extra income; it is a strategically employed component within a (solo) self-employment model—albeit for a smaller subset of the respondents.

5.2 Findings (II): Interests and demands regarding social security and the regulation of platform work

Against this background of perceived working conditions and employment-related strategies of platform workers, we now focus on needs and demands of platform workers in terms of regulation, social security and the representation of interests. Close to 86 percent of the respondents in our quantitative survey state that they prefer being self-employed over having an employment relationship, i.e., a contract with the platform they work on. With this high proportion of preferred self-employment in mind, it is all the more important to look at just what platform workers deem right and important with regard to the organisation and regulation of their atypical work, which thus far could not be integrated in the established systems and institutional logics of standard employment and co-determination.
First off, our qualitative data shows no clear consensus on whether or not a social security obligation for self-employed platform workers would be a good idea or not. One thought voiced by the respondents is that – while regulation, in principle, is perceived as positive – the introduction of an obligatory insurance could be deterrent to all actors involved and thus decrease profits both for platforms and platform workers, especially if platforms and/or clients were required to pay the employer's share of social security contributions. In this case, most of the respondents would be rather opposing to this socio-political measure. The quantitative data shows a clearer picture: 88 percent of our respondents think that social security with regard to self-employed platform work should remain voluntary and not become obligatory. Another thought voiced by the

respondents goes beyond the feared economic impact of socio-political measures. Part of the respondents are sceptic about regulation overall, as it might restrict individual's freedom. As described before, flexibility and autonomy are two of the key drivers for workers' engagement in (solo) self-employed platform work. This also applies to an interviewed 41-year-old IT freelancer. Before he decided to become self-employed (and henceforth also received jobs via platforms), he worked as a software developer in an agency. He describes that he is glad that he can now choose his customers and projects freely, in contrast to his previous employment. With regard to a stricter regulation and discussions about bogus self-employment in the platform economy he states:

> "[…] I kept hearing that this can somehow be negative and that this somehow counts as an employment relationship. So, I always think that's nonsense. […] Especially in IT and in today's world, this way of working is completely legitimate. […] somehow you are only allowed to have five sixths of your income from one client […], if you make more than five sixths of your income through a client, then you are basically employed […]. I think that's nonsense. So why wouldn't you work for the same client for a whole year if things are going well and the client just has a need?" (Freelancer 1, Sample A)

The comments of a designer who started platform work due to lack of alternative employment opportunities and for whom platform work is now her main job go in a similar direction: She sees future potential in the platform work and the experienced freedom is very important for here. Accordingly, she emphasises that platform work 'should not be regulated too rigidly because otherwise it would no longer work' (Designer 2, Sample A).

Apart from that, our quantitative data shows no unanimous desire for a collective that represents the interests of platform workers: While 40 percent of the respondents support the idea of a collective interest group, almost 35 percent oppose this idea and around 24 percent are indifferent to it. However, in comparison to other actors such as the government or political parties, where trust is relatively very low, platform workers in our sample seem to have more trust in grassroot initiatives of platform workers and unions to move forward with regard the situation of social security within the platform economy (see Figure 1).

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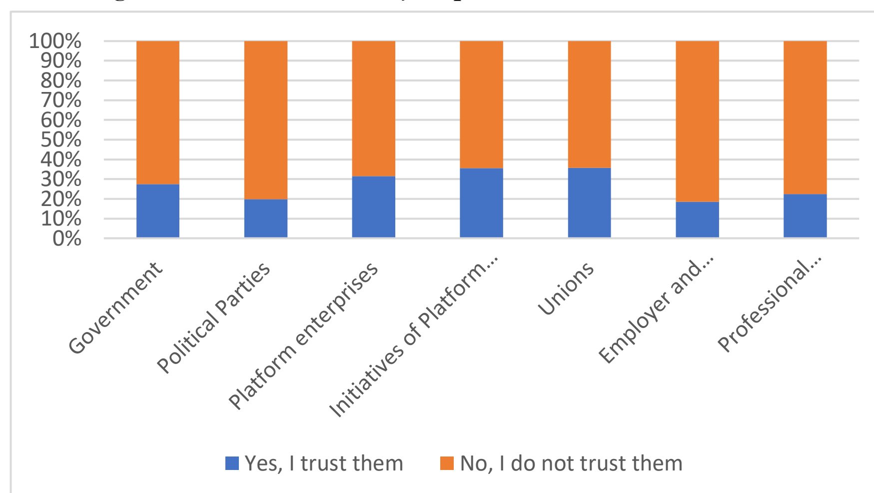
Figure 2 Platform workers' confidence in different actors with regard to moving forward social security in platform work



Source: Own calculation and visualisation; n=719; the corresponding question asked in the survey was as follows: "Which of these actors do you trust to successfully advocate for the social security of platform workers?"

As can be seen here, trust in institutional actors and interest groups of all kind – be it political parties or be it professional associations – is overall rather low, indicating a preference for individual representation. In this regard, these findings can be interpreted as a disenchantment especially with politics, in that the vast majority of respondents deem the government (72,5 percent) and political parties (80,1 percent) especially incapable of successfully advocating for the social security of platform workers. This is expressed against the background of a disillusion with socio-political measures so far, as can be seen in this interview excerpt from a conversation with a clickworker:

> "Whatever strategies they [alluding to the federal German government] work out, I can only advise everyone to rely on themselves and expand their range of competencies […] poor job, that they are doing up there." (Clickworker 1, Sample B)

Not only politicians but also collective organisations like trade unions and professional associations are seen as actors with limited opportunities to effectively support platform workers – not least because of their (solo) self-employed status, as an IT freelancer mentions:

> "Yeah, I mean, of course there are associations for freelancers etc. But they can't do anything at all. I mean, a trade union obviously has its right to exist for the employees and it is regulated by law. This does not apply to freelancers." (Freelancer 1, Sample A)

These disillusions and the low level of trust in institutional actors and scepticism about the sense and effectiveness of certain socio-political and regulatory measures seems to be due not least to the experiences of workers outside platform work. For some respondents, platform work has become part or even the focus of their employment out of necessity (for example, due to job loss). These experiences of insecurity, precariousness and job loss in a world of work that is actually regulated and institutionally embedded leads to some kind of relativisation of uncertainties and risks in the platform economy – as a designer from one of the biggest platforms for design and creative tasks states. Although she perceives platform work to be unsafe and exploitative, she sees no particular differences in it compared to other labour markets – also 'regular' employment would become more and more precarious:

> "From my point of view, security in this sense no longer exists. I mean, you can be on the streets in four weeks, you'll be fired, what are you doing then? […] The only certainty we have is that it will change. And the only thing you can do is be flexible and open and somehow master it." (Designer 2, Sample A)

In a way, these statements can be interpreted as a kind of resignation that reinforce an individual loner attitude in the face of adversities of the platform economy. This loner attitude and the afore mentioned low level of trust in institutions of social security and regulation of work are accompanied by the more or less absence of platforms itself as actors who could influence the employment conditions of platform workers in a more positive way.

Our respondents see a participation of platform enterprises in the regulation of platform work as a utopian, rather unrealistic event – this is because they do not believe that the platforms will actually engage in regulation attempts themselves as that might go hand in hand with potential losses in power. Interestingly, the vast majority of the respondents do not see the platforms as being responsible for regulation of platform work at all. In their self-perception, they – as self-employed individuals – should naturally always be responsible for themselves first and foremost or, as an interviewee puts it:

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"And I believe that the platform workers have just as much of an obligation as the government. So, you can't clearly say that the legislator has to put a rule in front of this. So, anyone who joins a platform is also making a decision to join it. Perhaps also for lack of alternatives. But I think [...] you can't place the blame unilaterally on the authorities." (Freelancer 1, Sample B)

Our quantitative data also illustrates this platform workers' tendency towards a "self-responsibilisation": in comparison to other actors such as the government, platform enterprises or clients, the platform workers attribute responsibility for protection against social risks to themselves the most (see Figure 2).

Figure 3. Responsibilities of different actors with regard to social security according to platform workers

Source: Own calculation and visualisation; n = 719; the corresponding question asked was: "In addition to the platform workers, it is also conceivable that the platform itself, the clients or the government pay contributions for the social security of the platform workers. Who do you personally see as responsible for the social security of platform workers and to what extent?"

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This paper investigated the demands that platform workers in various fields of the platform economy hold with regard to the regulation of platform work and the representation of their interests. The background of the study presented is the fact that platform work is mainly performed as self-employment and is disembedded spatially and temporally. Hence,

established welfare state institutions do not or only marginally offer protection and regulation. This is particularly true for the labour-centred, conservative welfare states that were the focus of our analysis (with special attention to Germany). Although this issue is discussed critically in academics, there are only few empirical investigations dealing explicitly with the representation and regulation of (online) platform workers and taking into account the heterogeneity of platform workers regarding their subjective orientations and individual employment constellations. Against this background, the study presented findings from an online survey amongst 719 platform workers in Germany conducted in December 2022 as well as from qualitative interviews with platform workers (26 interviews in total). In doing so, the study offered insights into platform workers' perceptions of their working conditions as well as their employment-related strategies they pursue with regard to the peculiarities of platform work. The study focused on highly labour-centred welfare states with institutionalised systems of workers' representation and participation, in which discontinuous employment, low wages and working in non-standard forms of employment is implicitly sanctioned. On a more abstract level, our investigations on the mentioned issues allow insights to the question to what extent the traditional institutions of labour regulation have a structuring function also for workers in new, digital fields of employment or whether new normative ideals of work and its regulation emerge.

Our study shows that despite common precarious working conditions and an 'objective' need for regulatory measures in the field of platform economy addressed in previous research, only a minority of the workers investigated strives for collective interest representation while most of them support the idea of self-responsibility. The rather low prevalence of preferences for the collective organisation of the interests of platform workers illustrates that the abstinence of regulation is a major driving force for performing platform work. Previous research has rightfully pointed to the strategies of platform enterprises to undermine established labour market and welfare state institutions and hence individualise social risks[65]. However, our findings suggest that it is also the platform workers themselves who actively force a free riding of social protection and who – like other self-employed in the 'regular' economy[66] – seem to prefer individualistic representation. Regardless of legal aspects and discussions

[65] J. Schor, S. Vallas, 2023, *op. cit.*
F. Beckmann, F. Hoose, *op. cit.*
[66] B. Apitzsch et al., *op. cit.*

about misclassifications and bogus self-employment of platform work[67], our findings indicate that only a small minority of platform workers prefer to be employed rather than being self-employed. The platform workers in our study ascribe an extensive level of (self-)responsibility to *themselves* with regard to the organisation and social protection within their work in the platform economy. The low level of trust in institutional actors and forms of collective organisation as well as the disillusions expressed by some of the interviewed platform workers with regard to socio-political and regulatory measures are due to their individual desire for (solo) self-employed work. Last but not least, insecurities and disappointments in other, institutionalised employment context lead to some kind of resignation towards institutions of social security and labour regulation as a whole – strengthening the strive for personal responsibility and fuelling the individual self-perception of the platform workers as 'loners'.
The findings of our investigation show that employment strategies of platform workers and their orientations and self-perceptions regarding the working conditions in the platform economy are highly individualised. Even against the background of these overall rather individualistic preferences, there have been initiatives in which platform workers – with the contribution of established institutional actors such as unions – successfully organised their interests. While these initiatives, such as the Youtubers union, hold a rather low degree of institutionalisation up to this date, their examples show that the accumulation of resources within interest groups can put on pressure on platform enterprises and, in the very least, can make business and work organisation models and algorithmic platform structures (more) transparent for the public. However, these rather scarce examples indicate the specific challenges (within conservative welfare states and its institutions) concerning questions of regulation and representation in new fields of labour like the platform economy. While established institutions of structuring and regulating labour continue to play a role – remember that at least 40 percent of respondents in our quantitative sample support the idea of collective interest representation and, by this, ideas of solidarity-based approaches of labour regulation – the logics and 'programs' of such institutions have to reflect the specific dynamics and heterogeneities of the platform economy. Like in other cases (for the so-called 'new economy'[68]), institutionalised patterns of regulation and representation

[67] O. Chesalina, *op. cit.*
[68] J. Abel, L. Pries, *Shifting Patterns of Labor Regulation: Highly Qualified Knowledge Workers in German New Media Companies*, in Critical Sociology, 2007, vol. 33, 101-125.

have to take into account employment structures that don't follow the idea of 'normal' work as well as the individual orientations and specific demands of the workers. To conclude: in order to counteract tendencies of de-institutionalisation in the platform economy and instead achieve re-institutionalisation, change and stability have to go hand in hand – it is necessary to depart from established ways of regulation and interest representation without losing sight of the fundamental orientation of these institutions, namely ensuring sustainable and fair working conditions.

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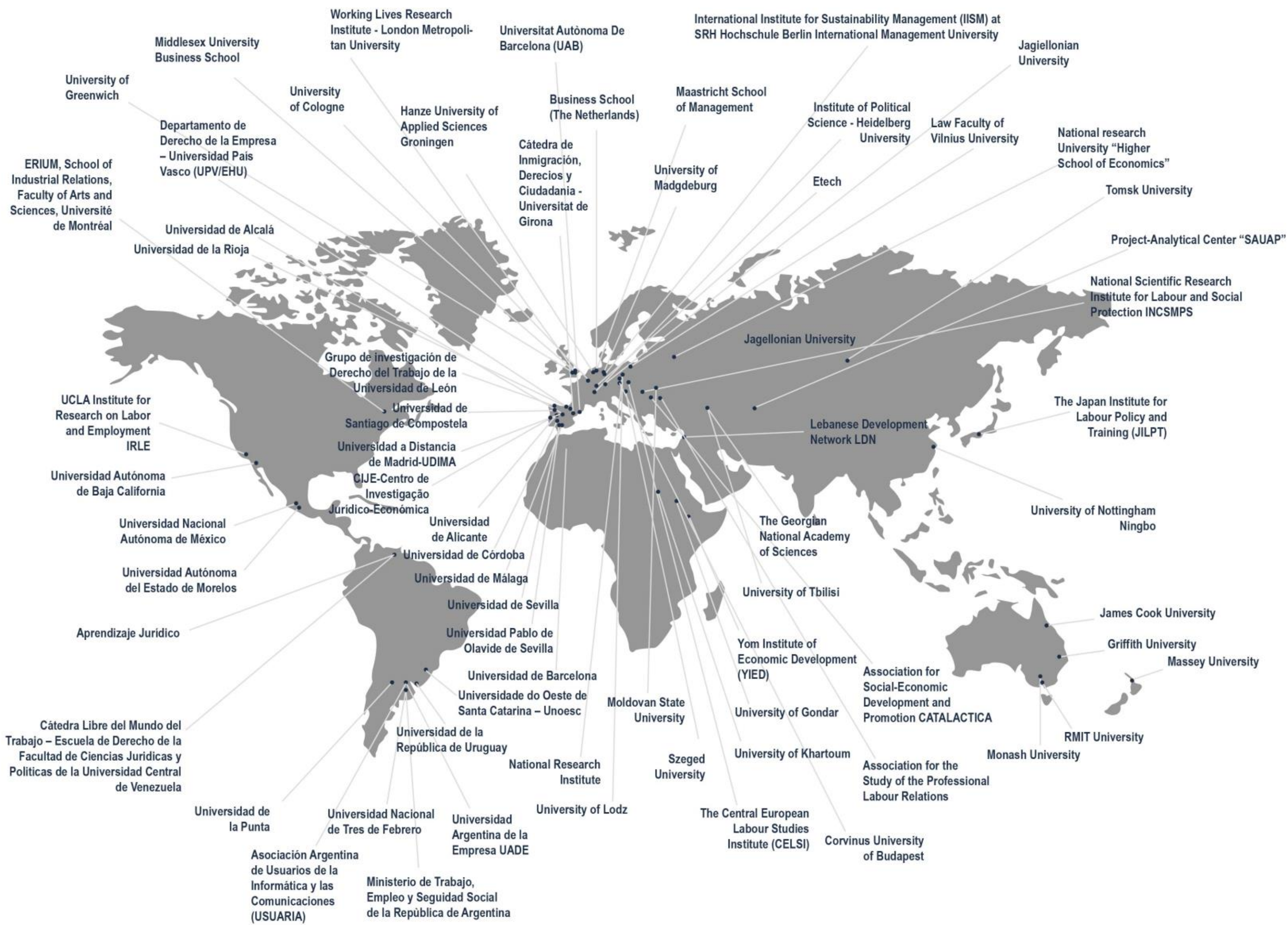

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