

# TREATED LIKE ‘ROBOTS’

TUC Anti–Racism Officer **Riz Hussain** explains the harsh and insecure world of the gig economy and suggests solutions to improve workers’ rights.

The number of people working for gig economy platforms has nearly tripled in England and Wales over the past five years. In 2021 three in 20 working adults – or 4.4 million people – worked via gig economy platforms in England and Wales at least once a week, compared to around one in 20 in 2016.

The term ‘platform labour’ covers a wide range of gig economy jobs found via a platform (a website or app) – for example Uber, JustEat, Deliveroo or Gorillas – and accessed using a laptop, smartphone or other internet–connected device.

The overwhelming majority of workers use platform work to supplement other forms of income, and are increasingly likely to patch together a living from multiple different sources. This leads to exceptionally long working days. A large proportion of the gig economy workforce live in poverty and face exploitation. The transactional and remote structures mean workers are much more atomised – a significant challenge for organising on collective issues, the bedrock of the trade union movement.

We know the gig economy increases the insecurity that comes with these employment models, contributing to broader inequality across society. We are increasingly concerned about the gigification of other sectors, like teaching, social care and hospitality, which could force more workers into precarious working conditions.

Whether they have to log onto an app for a shift or be told by an agency whether they are working from one week to the next, workers in the gig economy are connected by a lack of decent money, rights, protection and control over their time.

Wages are being driven down and the workers’ lack of power means that fewer of them are collectivising in the workplace to demand that their basic rights and protections are met.

Increasingly, evidence shows that insecure work is compounding labour market discrimination against Black and minority ethnic (BME) workers, women, young workers, and those living in poorer areas of the UK.

These groups are at the sharp end, working in jobs based on temporary or insecure contracts through agency work. This type of job market has created a huge power imbalance between workers and employers.

Zero–hours contracts are the most egregious example of one–sided flexibility at work where the employer has absolute power over whether and when to offer shifts. Some



argue that the flexibility is a benefit to workers, but we know that most BME workers on variable-hours contracts would prefer to work fixed hours.

Ali is 28 years old and a delivery driver for a large online retailer in the East Midlands. When he started working for the company he wasn't given any choice about the type of contract he worked on. He was told that this style of contract would give him flexibility and freedom.

Ali was told that he would have the ability to decide his own hours but was never really told about the negative side of the working arrangement. 'That's the way they bring you inside and get you to accept the job. When you fall sick or anything like that, you are not paid for it. There are so many downsides to being on a zero-hours contract that it's not really beneficial for us.'

'If I had the option, I would be on a standard contract. You know your job is secure, you know your pay is secure. You don't just wake up the next morning without a job. You can plan that way.'

Huge swathes of the workforce suffer from the effects of insecure employment. Zero-hours contract workers have great uncertainty over their working hours meaning they often don't know when their next shift will be or if they will be able to pay their bills.

Many working in the platform economy are told they are self-employed. This means they miss out on basic work rights such as sick pay and parental leave. What's more, they are left to struggle financially – 1.88 million self-employed workers earn less than two thirds of the median wage, which is just under £10.

Many migrant workers come as seasonal workers, brought to Britain to work as fruit and vegetable pickers. They are charged recruitment fees that often leave them poorer than before they came to the UK.

BME workers are disproportionately affected by the growth of insecure work. Since 2011, the proportion of the working population in insecure work grew from 10.7 percent to 11.8 percent. BME workers have borne the brunt of this increase. In the last 11 years the proportion of BME workers in insecure employment has risen from 12.2 percent to 17.8 percent.

Trade unions have led the campaign against insecure work by negotiating agreements which bring workers back into permanent and secure jobs. The trade unions GMB and Unite have been making efforts for a number of years to organise workers in Amazon warehouses across the UK. A wave of unprecedented strikes were organised last year in Amazon's Coventry site in their fight for a minimum hourly pay rate of £15 and union rights.

This action shed light on the harsh realities faced by warehouse workers, revealing a disturbing narrative of dehumanisation and exploitation within the tech giant's operations. Workers said the company thought of them as 'robots' and that they are subject to grueling work conditions and constant surveillance.

Despite efforts to automate tasks, human labour remains essential, leading to an environment where employees are pushed to their limits to fulfill orders efficiently. This relentless pace takes a toll on workers' physical and mental well-being, with reports of injuries and burnout alarmingly common.

The lack of job security exacerbates the situation. Workers describe feeling disposable, with little regard for their contributions or concerns. Surveillance measures, including constant monitoring of productivity and strict time constraints, only serve to reinforce this sense of alienation and devaluation.

Industrial action emerges as a powerful expression of dissent against these oppressive conditions. It represents a collective effort by workers to demand better treatment, fair wages, and improved working conditions. Despite the risks involved, workers are driven by a shared determination to challenge the status quo and assert their collective power.

A government serious about addressing racial inequality must focus on fixing the disparities and unfairness in our job market.

Current rules make it tough for trade unions to organise and stand up for workers. This means many people who could use our help are shut out.

To fight against exploitation and deal with the deeply rooted racism in our labour market, we urgently need to tackle insecure work and exploitation of workers through platform jobs. We also need policies that encourage good jobs with fair pay and hours.

We need the government to take serious and coordinated action to fix insecure work and deal with racism in the job market, especially for BME workers who face discrimination and exploitation the most.

These steps are necessary for the government to make sure that companies play fair and treat everyone equally.

The government should make race equality requirements for the supply of goods and services in the public sector. Companies that don't follow these rules shouldn't get government contracts.

Zero-hours contracts should be banned. Workers should have contracts that reflect their regular hours, and they should be compensated if shifts are cancelled suddenly.

We need to change the rules so that all workers, no matter what, get the same rights from day one.

That includes getting paid if they're made redundant, being protected from being fired unfairly, having time off for family reasons, getting sick pay, and being able to work flexible hours. Employment laws need to be updated to stop this two-tiered workforce. Trade union legislation that makes it hard for workers to strike or for unions to help workers in jobs like the gig economy should be repealed. We need unions recognised in all workplaces to represent workers through collective bargaining agreements that are sector-specific and sector-wide.

Employers should have to report on their ethnicity pay gap data and go further than just looking at pay differences. Employers should also keep track of who gets hired and promoted, who gets training opportunities, and who gets in trouble at work. Working with unions on plans to fix any problems and checking progress every year is important.

Taking these steps can help spot and fix unfairness in hiring, promotions, pay, training, and how workers are treated when they do something wrong. These changes won't solve all the problems of racism at work or end insecure jobs, but they're a big step towards making sure everyone has a fair job with fair pay.

For this to happen, the government must take action. If we don't act, inequality at work – in particular racial inequality – will only get worse.

**This essay is part of a collection of thought pieces curated by Amnesty International UK and Labour Campaign for Human Rights. June 2024**

*The views expressed in this essay are the author's own and not those of Amnesty International UK or Labour Campaign for Human Rights*