

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed

www.ijlra.com

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UBERIZATION OF LABOUR: CAN INTERNATIONAL LABOUR LAW PROTECT GIG WORKERS?

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Abstract

The “Uberization” of labour—the rapid diffusion of on-demand, app-mediated work—has transformed how tasks are allocated, supervised, and paid. While platforms commission flexibility and entrepreneurship, millions of workers encounter non transparent algorithms, shifting pay formulas, weak safety nets, and uncertain legal status. This paper asks whether international labour law, together with regional and national reforms, can effectively protect gig workers. It proceeds in five moves. First, it defines Uberization and maps the scale and distinctive risks of platform work. Second, it distils the current international normative toolkit (notably International Labour Organization instruments and ongoing standard-setting debates) and tracks regional initiatives such as the European Union’s Platform Work Directive process. Third, it analyzes comparative case law and legislation—from *Uber BV v Aslam* in the United Kingdom to Spain’s “Rider Law,” known as Royal Decree-Law, California’s worker-classification test in *Dynamex*, and India’s partial recognition of gig and platform workers in the Code on Social Security, 2020 under Chapter-I, Section 2(35), alongside new state-level welfare experiments. Fourth, it examines policy pathways around social protection (portable benefits, contributory funds, and mixed financing), data rights and algorithmic governance, and collective representation. Finally, it proposes a principled framework for aligning international labour standards with domestic innovation: presume employment when control resembles employment, ensure minimum floors (wages, hours, health and safety), and mandate transparency over algorithmic management, and build portable, multi-payer social protection that follows the worker across platforms and borders. The paper concludes that international labour law can protect gig workers—provided its core standards are deliberately translated into platform-specific rules and robust enforcement architectures.

Introduction

“Uberization” captures the migration of work to digital platforms that divide jobs into discrete tasks, match them to workers through algorithms, and pay per transaction. What looks novel technologically revives an old legal tension: when firms externalize labour costs by contracting “independent” providers, do labour standards still bite? Survey evidence and comparative research show that platform workers experience lower and more uncertain pay, increase economic insecurity, and restricted voice relative to comparable W-2 (a formally employee working for a company or organization in U.S.) or payroll workers.¹

Internationally, governments and courts have responded unevenly. UK courts have recognized many drivers as “workers” entitled to minimum wage and paid leave; Spain created a statutory presumption of employment for riders, California’s superior court adopted a strict “ABC test,” (Dynamex Operations West, Inc. v. Superior Court) then politics partially re-balanced with subsequent measures, India’s Parliament recognized “gig” and “platform workers” as beneficiaries in the Code on Social Security, 2020, while several states are now designing welfare boards and funds.²

This paper argues that international labour law already offers strong backbone to freedom of non-discrimination, fair remuneration, social security, association, health and safety and that the task now is to extend, specify, and enforce those support in the platform context.

A. The Business Model, Scale and Risks of Platform Work

- ***The platform model***

Gig platforms claim to be technology marketplaces, not employers. Though the International Bar Association has not made definitive statement specifically addressing this classification. Yet they often set prices, control access to customers, rate workers, and unilaterally change terms features associated with an employment relationship. Comparative commentary emphasizes that classification is a legal question determined by factual control, not by contract labels or worker preference.³

¹ Economic insecurity among gig workers relative to W-2 service-sector workers is documented by the Economic Policy Institute’s survey and related analyses. ([Economic Policy Institute](#)) ([Economic Policy Institute, RSIS International](#))

² ([NITI Aayog](#), [RSIS International](#), [International Labour Organization](#), [Wikipedia](#), [articles.manupatra.com](#), [The Times of India](#))

³ ([International Bar Association](#))

- ***Economic insecurity and working conditions***

Large-scale surveys conducted by USA during the pandemic and subsequent results demonstrate high rates of income volatility, unpaid time and difficulty meeting basic expenses among gig workers relative to other service sector workers. Research also documents the psychological toll of algorithmic management and the link between opaque ratings, deactivations, and burnout.

- ***India's expanding gig workforce***

Policy analyses in India, including those by NITI Aayog and other think tanks, along with sectoral studies, underscore the rapid expansion of platform-based work in areas such as delivery services, ride-hailing, and online freelancing, while also pointing to persistent gaps in social protection.⁴ In response, national legislation now formally defines “gig” and “platform” workers and envisions targeted welfare schemes. States like Rajasthan and Karnataka have already introduced registration processes and welfare boards, while Maharashtra has recently initiated a state-wide mapping exercise to guide the development of protective policies.⁵

B. International Norms: What the ILO and Global Actors Offer

- ***The ILO's core principles and evolving guidance***

The ILO's mandate decent work, social justice, and international labour standards applies regardless of contractual form. Across reports and policy notes, the Organization has examined digital labour platforms, decent work benchmarks, and options for extending social protection to non-standard workers, including those in the platform economy.⁶

A joint knowledge note for G20 Labour Ministers emphasized: (i) closing coverage gaps through a mix of contributory and tax-financed schemes; (ii) ensuring portability across jobs and borders; and (iii) using data-sharing obligations on platforms to administer benefits and enforcement.⁷ The ILO's broader decent-work metrics (as operationalized by programmes such as Fairwork) have been adapted to platforms, providing a practical scorecard for pay,

⁴ For India's workforce projections and formalisation challenges in non-agricultural sectors (including gig work), see ORF's *India Employment Outlook 2030*. ([Observer Research Foundation](#)) ([Holistic AI, Observer Research Foundation, ICRIER](#))

⁵ ([articles.manupatra.com](#), [Consilium](#), [The Times of India](#))

⁶ ([Global Law Experts](#), [Ministry of Labour and Employment](#))

⁷ ([Ministry of Labour and Employment](#))

conditions, contracts, management, and representation.⁸

- ***Towards platform-specific standards?***

While the ILO has not yet adopted a binding convention dedicated exclusively to platform work, ongoing deliberations and technical papers converge on protecting workers regardless of contractual label, improving algorithmic transparency, and mandating social protection coverage. These directions align with core conventions (e.g., freedom of association, collective bargaining, non-discrimination) and with the Recommendation on the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy.⁹

C. Regional Developments: The European Union’s Approach

After years of negotiation, EU institutions advanced a Directive on improving working conditions in platform work that centers on a rebuttable presumption of employment and strong rules on algorithmic transparency and human oversight. As of March-July 2024, the Parliament approved the text, and by February-July 2025, the Council reported the measure moving towards adoption with Member States preparing implementation. The Directive’s core ideas—who bears the burden of proof, data rights, and information obligations are now shaping national reforms even before full transposition.¹⁰

Why it matters: An EU-wide presumption rebalances incentives: platforms must justify independent-contractor status, workers gain access to minimum-wage floors, paid leave, and collective rights unless the presumption is defended. Transparency rules create audit trails for pay changes and deactivations.

D. Comparative Case Law and Legislative Trajectories

- **United Kingdom: *Uber BV v Aslam***

The UK Supreme Court held in 2021 that Uber drivers are “workers” (an intermediate status) entitled to minimum wage and paid leave, based on platform control over fares, terms, and access to customers. The Court warned against over-reliance on contract wording when the reality is one of subordination.¹¹

⁸ ([Taylor & Francis Online](#))

⁹ ([Global Law Experts](#))

¹⁰ ([Franchise Tax Board](#), [PRS Legislative Research](#))

¹¹ *Uber BV v Aslam*, UK Supreme Court (2021), established worker status based on real-world control. ([NITI Aayog](#))

- ***Spain: The “Rider Law”***

Spain’s Royal Decree-Law 9/2021 created a presumption that food-delivery riders are employees and mandated algorithmic transparency to worker representatives. Early evidence suggests improved rights but continuing disputes at the margins (e.g., franchising workarounds).¹²

- ***United States (California): Dynamex and the ABC Test***

California’s Supreme Court in *Dynamex* adopted the ABC test: a worker is presumed an employee unless (A) free from control, (B) performs work outside the hiring entity’s usual course of business, and (C) is customarily engaged in an independent trade. This test tightened misclassification rules in sectors including delivery and ride-hailing and sparked subsequent legislative and ballot-measure responses.¹³

- ***India: Recognition without full conversion***

India’s Code on Social Security, 2020 formally recognizes “gig worker” and “platform worker” under Chapter-I, Section 2(35) which categories and authorizes tailored social-security schemes; however, the operative chapters remain to be fully brought into force nationwide, and many benefits require detailed scheme design and financing. States are moving: Rajasthan enacted a dedicated registration and welfare fund mechanism (2023); Karnataka has established a Welfare Board by ordinance (2025); Maharashtra is building a registry as a prelude to a comprehensive policy.¹⁴

E. India in Focus: Policy, Practice, and Open Gaps

- ***National frameworks and think-tank diagnostics***

ICRIER’s policy work notes the mismatch between India’s binary labour-law legacy and the realities of platform work, urging targeted schemes and fiscal clarity (including tax treatment).¹⁵ Scholarship and official communications highlight that the Social Security Code envisions central schemes for life and disability cover, accident insurance, health and

¹² Spain’s Royal Decree-Law 9/2021 (“Rider Law”) presumes employment for riders and mandates algorithmic transparency. ([International Labour Organization](#))

¹³ California’s *Dynamex* decision adopted the ABC test to combat misclassification. ([RSIS International](#))

¹⁴ Rajasthan’s 2023 law creates registration and a dedicated welfare-fund architecture for gig workers. ([Consilium](#)) ([Wikipedia](#))

¹⁵ For early ecosystem mapping of online freelancing/microwork in India, see ICRIER’s study on online freelancing and microwork. ([ICRIER](#))

maternity benefits, old-age protection, and crèche facilities for gig workers.¹⁶

- *State innovations*

- **Rajasthan (2023)**: Mandatory platform registration, transaction-linked welfare cess, and a Board to administer benefits—among the first comprehensive state models.¹⁷
- **Karnataka (2025)**: Newly constituted Welfare Board with a rights charter (fair contracts, transparency, protection against unjust blocking).¹⁸
- **Maharashtra (2025)**: Systematic mapping and database to extend legal and welfare coverage (insurance, pensions, skills).¹⁹

- *Civil society and research signals*

ORF's work foregrounds gendered vulnerabilities, heat-risk exposure, and the need for algorithmic transparency and social security tailored to platform work—especially for women and migrant workers.²⁰

F. Algorithmic Management, Data Rights, and Due Process

Platform work is governed by ratings, dynamic pricing, and automated discipline. Research connects opaque algorithms to stress and burnout; policy proposals focus on auditable transparency, human review of automated decisions, reasoned notice before deactivations, and worker access to the data used to evaluate them. (PMC) The EU's forthcoming rules, Spain's Rider Law, and emerging US debates (including antitrust- safe spaces for worker coordination) point toward a **due-process architecture** for algorithmic work.²¹

¹⁶ On India's federal communications about gig-worker schemes under the Social Security Code, see Press Information Bureau updates. ([Press Information Bureau](#))

¹⁷ Rajasthan's 2023 law creates registration and a dedicated welfare-fund architecture for gig workers. ([Consilium](#))

¹⁸ Karnataka's 2025 ordinance establishes a Welfare Board with rights on fair contracts, transparency, and protection from arbitrary blocking. ([The Times of India](#))

¹⁹ Maharashtra's 2025 mapping and policy initiative aims to extend legal and welfare coverage to gig workers. ([The Times of India](#))

²⁰ For gendered and climatic vulnerabilities (e.g., heat stress) among Indian platform workers, see ORF. ([Observer Research Foundation](#))

²¹ The EU Platform Work Directive process advances a presumption of employment and algorithmic-management safeguards. ([Franchise Tax Board](#), [PRS Legislative Research](#))

G. Social Protection for a Mobile Workforce

- ***Design principles from international guidance***

ILO and allied bodies emphasize **universality, adequacy, and portability**— delivered through mixed financing (platform contributions, worker co-pays, and public subsidies), clear thresholds to avoid under-coverage, and interoperable registries to follow workers across apps and borders.²²

- ***Portable benefits and pooled funds***

Recent policy debates, including in the US Congress and think-tanks, have revived portable benefits that attach to the person rather than the job. These models can coexist with either employment or contractor status but must avoid undercutting reclassification where employment is the reality.²³ India's Rajasthan-style transaction levy is a variant funding an umbrella welfare account regardless of formal status.

H. Case Studies

i. United Kingdom (ride-hailing)

- **Legal outcome:** “Worker” status; floors for pay and leave.
- **Operational impact:** Uber adjusted its UK model (e.g., pay for waiting time disputes continue), and litigation spread to food delivery.
- **Lesson:** A meaningful intermediate status can deliver floors if backed by enforcement and clear hours/pay calculations.²⁴

ii. Spain (food delivery)

- **Legal outcome:** Presumption of employment and algorithmic transparency to unions.
- **Operational impact:** Widespread payroll transitions; some platforms experimented with subcontracting/franchising.
- **Lesson:** Strong presumptions can work but require vigilance against avoidance.²⁵

²² ILO/G20 knowledge notes outline principles for extending sustainable social protection to platform workers (universality, portability, data-sharing). ([Ministry of Labour and Employment](#))

²³ For a policy case for portable benefits, see Brookings; for current US legislative debates, see contemporary reporting. ([Brookings](#), [Vox](#))

²⁴ ([NITI Aayog](#))

²⁵ ([International Labour Organization](#))

iii. *California, USA (multi-sector)*

- **Legal outcome:** ABC test tightened misclassification; subsequent political cycles modified coverage in some sectors.
- **Lesson:** Clear statutory tests aid enforcement; durability depends on political settlement and preemption choices.²⁶

iv. *India (multi-sector)*

- **Legal outcome:** National recognition of gig/platform workers for social security; state welfare boards piloting benefits.
- **Lesson:** Where employment conversion is politically contested, **fund-first** approaches can still secure health, accident, and pension supports while classification debates continue.²⁷

I. Perspectives from International and Comparative Scholarship

Academic and policy literature converges on the following: (i) classification should reflect *substance over form*; (ii) algorithmic management must be subject to labour- law due process; (iii) social protection should be portable and, where feasible, platform-financed in proportion to transactions; and (iv) collective representation must be enabled without antitrust chill.²⁸ Commentaries aimed at employers acknowledge the global drift toward tighter rules, even as they map remaining gaps across jurisdictions.²⁹

J. Can International Labour Law Protect Gig Workers? A Framework

Proposition 1: Presume employment where platform control mirrors an employer's control.

Courts and statutes that focus on *actual* control (pricing, access, sanctions) better capture platform realities. The UK Supreme Court's analysis and the ABC test offer administrable templates.³⁰

Proposition 2: Where employment is not established, guarantee universal floors.

International standards support minimum pay, working time limits, health and safety, and

²⁶ (RSIS International)

²⁷ (Wikipedia, Consilium, The Times of India)

²⁸ (tcp.law.uiowa.edu, Columbia Law Review, Brookings)

²⁹ (Norton Rose Fulbright)

³⁰ (NITI Aayog, RSIS International)

social security. These floors should apply to “workers” regardless of label, consistent with ILO guidance on non-standard forms.³¹

Proposition 3: Mandate algorithmic transparency and human review. The EU approach and Spain’s Rider Law show how to (a) require explainability for automated decisions, (b) prohibit fully automated termination, and (c) ensure access to data used for pay and performance.³²

Proposition 4: Build portable, multi-payer social protection. Use transaction-linked contributions (as in Rajasthan) or platform-side levies feeding personal accounts. Ensure national IDs/registries so benefits follow the worker across platforms and borders (as ILO materials recommend).³³

Proposition 5: Enable collective representation and dispute resolution. Clarify that concerted activity by platform workers is lawful; remove antitrust uncertainty; encourage sectoral dialogue to set fair pay and conditions.³⁴

K. Practical Tools for Policymakers and Platforms

- *A jurisdictional checklist (illustrative)*
 - i. **Coverage:** Do statutory floors apply to “workers” beyond formal employees?
 - ii. **Presumption:** Is there a rebuttable presumption of employment for platform work?
 - iii. **Data & AI:** Are platforms required to share pay-setting logic and provide human review for deactivations?
 - iv. **Benefits:** Is there a funded, portable benefit account with platform co-contributions?
 - v. **Enforcement:** Are labour inspectors empowered to audit algorithms and payment data?
 - vi. **Voice:** Are unions/worker associations recognized for bargaining and consultation?

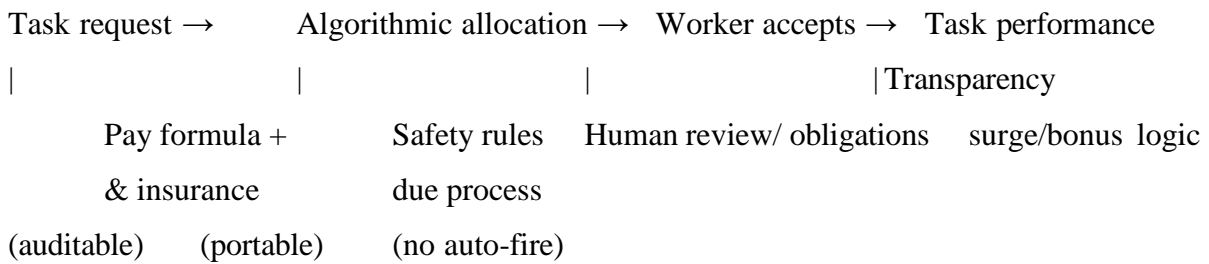
³¹ ([Global Law Experts](#))

³² ([Franchise Tax Board](#), [International Labour Organization](#))

³³ ([Consilium](#), [Ministry of Labour and Employment](#))

³⁴ ([Columbia Law Review](#))

- ***A simple conceptual diagram***



L. Addressing Common Counter-Arguments

Flexibility will vanish if workers are employees

Comparative experience shall shows otherwise workers status in the UK and payroll transitions in Spain [reserved scheduling flexibility while adding pay floors and leave entitlements. Flexibility and protection are not mutually exclusive, they require thoughtful scheduling, minimum-earnings, and overtime rules adapted to on demand work.

Portable benefits alone are enough

Portable benefits improve coverage but cannot substitute for proper classification where control and dependence exist. Benefits models should complement-never displace-protections like minimum wage, collective rights, overtime.³⁵

Platforms are just marketplaces.

Where platform set prices, control access and discipline workers through dat, they perform employer like functions. The courts increasingly look past contracts labels to the lived reality of control.³⁶

M. Conclusion

Uberization will remain part of the labour market. The gig worker is technically included under economic activity in the periodic labour force survey, without the specific classification, the survey fails to offer visibility into the unique nature of digital labour, characterized by multiple job roles dependence on algorithms, lack of formal contract and absence of safety metrics. The 2025 Union budget of India took several measure to formally recognized gig and platform workers and extended various social skill to this growing work force. Despite this

³⁵ ([Brookings](#))

³⁶ ([NITI Aayog](#))

recognition, The Revised Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), 2025 does not include substantive changes to account for the diverse form of gig and platform workers. The central question is whether the rules of decent work migrate with it. International labour law already contains the DNA for protection fair pay, safe conditions, social security, and voice. The comparative record suggests a workable synthesis adopt presumptions of employment where control is high; extend universal floors to all workers; legislate algorithmic transparency and human review; and finance portable social protection through platform-linked contributions. These measures, pursued through ILO- informed national reforms and regional directives, can turn an extractive model into one that is both innovative and fair.

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