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Disruptive (dis)engagement: platformisation as a global social policy

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Global digital platforms have become important actors for economy and work with social policy consequences. This article analyses strategies and actions of global digital platforms from the perspective of how and what kind of global social policy these represent. It draws from analysis of how platform company strategic approaches relate to rights, regulation, and redistribution, and then using abductive reasoning and mixed methods empirical case study in Europe, articulate challenges to future global social policy. It examines what priorities of platform companies imply to global social policy and identifies five political and strategic elements of importance for global social policy: (1) denial or avoidance of employer status, (2) identifying as a “tech company providing services”, (3) focus on private social insurance in contrast to statutory social security, (4) addressing social security as a market-based service through voluntary partnerships, and (5) investor driven business model and global engagement. Drawing from theoretical and empirical data, the article further examines potential countermeasures and solutions, which could be of relevance at different levels of governance. It concludes that social policy impacts of platform economy are more related to the business model than technology. Platform economy business models currently support upward redistribution and avoidance of regulatory measures to address minimum income, social protection, and workers’ rights, yet platform economy is data rich and also could provide scope for government and regulatory action.

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Introduction

The assertion and application of disruptive policies by the labor platform companies have become widely known (Thelen 2018; Dubal 2021; Shontell 2014; Calo and Rosenblatt 2016). In contrast to online-platform work, on-location work, and corporations, such as ride-hailing giant Uber, should have been easy cases for regulation (Collier et al. 2017). Yet Uber and other on-location platform companies have managed to challenge, resist, and compromise regulatory measures in several countries. Yet we do not have a predestined reason why digitalization of labor and governance could not lead to stronger social policy and reduction of the informal economy as one of the outcomes of datafication and intensification surveillance. Indeed, early models of labor platforms—or sharing economy based on co-production—suggested also potential for more equal relationships between participants if not revival of more cooperative approaches (Koen and Schor 2017).

How we understand global social policy defines how we relate to global businesses and their influence on national policies. Platform economy has become analyzed in the context of precarious and changing work, but less in terms of implications to wider social policy and social protection. Here we analyze the contribution of platform companies through the global social policy framework of rights, redistribution, and regulation (Deacon 2007; Deacon et al. 2005). Traditionally social policy has been defined through institutional engagement, agency, and government normative, legal, or explicit policy stances. However, a lack of formal social policy measures or disruptive practices seeking to dismantle or avoid such obligations can be seen as a particular social policy. We ask what kind of global social policy the transnational labor platform companies, such as Uber implicitly or explicitly seek to achieve? What kind of global social policy challenges “platformisation” represent especially in the European context and what kind of countermeasures and more socially responsible options could be envisaged?

Methods

Our argument utilizes an abductive approach in examining how platform companies relate to social policy and what kind of global social policy platform economy represents. Our argument draws from social policy and platform company-related academic literature as well as empirical analysis of company documents, European Union regulatory consultations and debates concerning the 2021 European Commission proposed directive on working conditions, key informant interviews of European Commission, Finnish regulatory authorities, trade unions at national and European level, European social policy researchers, intergovernmental organizations, and platform companies as well as 20 semi-structured thematic interviews of Uber drivers in each of three cities, Helsinki (Finland), London (United Kingdom), and St Petersburg (Russia). Driver interviews were made by taking a ride in the city and asking drivers for thematic semi-structured interviews directly in 2019–2022 before and after the pandemic with compensation for the time used for the interviews. Key informant interviews were conducted online. All interviews were based on semi-structured thematic interviews with informed consent and recorded, transcribed, translated, and moved to Atlas.ti for coding and further thematic analysis. Our conceptual analysis was based on theoretical and documentary focus and insight utilizing the analytical framework on rights, regulation, and redistribution, while the interviews were used to complement, contest, and elaborate the emerging conceptual argument on global social policy.

Results

We argue that the core operational model of labor platforms is based on a particular type of global social policy expressed through five strategic elements of relevance to social protection, or rather, lack of social protection, and further positioning of solutions to the commercial policy context rather than as social protection or employment policy measures. Furthermore, we emphasize that what is promoted by platform companies is at odds with the wider aims of existing global social policy and undermines the scope and capacity of governments to achieve social protection obligations. Yet, there are countermeasures and alternative mechanisms to change the situation.

In the next sections we argue our case in relation to the current understanding of global social policy as set in employment-related norms and social protection, current policy debates in the context of European Union policy-making, and key disputes concerning the role of the platform economy. The social policy implications and politics can thus be described by five strategic elements of relevance to global social policy (Table 1).

In recent years, we have seen a general tendency to shift from the “sharing economy” of co-consumption and later co-production towards a more corporate and profit-driven “platform economy”, “taking economy” (Calo and Rosenblatt 2016), or platform capitalism (Srniczek 2017). The positive take from the early years of the “sharing” economy is reflected, for example, in the European Commission’s emphasis on “collaborative economy” (European Commission 2016). Yet it has later become clear that if viewed from the perspective of social policy, platform company business models of early movers have been far from collaborative. They have benefited from avoidance of social obligations in high-income countries and/or lack of social regulation in low- and middle-income countries. Our interviews with drivers confirmed that drivers were bound to cover lower margins through increased working hours in all countries (Koivusalo et al. 2024).

A common feature of many labor platform companies is to not identify as an employer beyond the limited core personnel. This has been at the core of the dispute for the European Commission proposal for a directive on platform workers (Aloisi et al. 2023). Platform companies call themselves tech companies and emphasize their role as “service partners” in relation to those who perform the core of labor. This was confirmed also by our key informant interviews. The identity of the worker and the identity of the platform company have become a cornerstone for many court cases in the EU and UK on the rights of workers in platform economy (European Commission 2021a, b, Amaxopoulou et al. 2021, Mackay and Powell, 2018, ETUC 2021, London Employment Tribunal 2016). Changing terms of identification of platform company’s and workers’ status, allows the strengthening of company’s position and commercial priorities under commercial policy and to operate more freely under the legal framework of trade in services. The technology company is likely to claim that they “sell information services” to drivers and delivery riders who are “independent contractors”. The labor platform companies such as Uber, Delivery Hero and Wolt have consistently insisted that they are not transportation companies and do not have to comply with regulation of the transport sector regulations or other sectoral or local regulations and agreements. Strategically we can see this identification to fit well with an intention to reduce labor costs especially in countries, where employers are accountable for health insurance costs. Amazon Mechanical Turk is perhaps the most known and explicit crowdsourcing form of hidden labor, yet it is only part of the larger Amazon Web Services (AWS) (Altenried 2020).

Table 1 Five strategic elements of platform economy in relation to global social policy.

Strategic global social policy dimension	Impact on rights	Impact on regulation	Impact on redistribution
Denial or avoidance of employer status for most “platform workers” applying partnership- or contractor-based business model operating under commercial law for on-location services	Undermining established employer obligation and labor rights under national employment law and rights.	Operational regulatory framework in the context of commercial rather than employment law restricting obligations towards “partners” or subcontractors”. Forum shifting to commercial policy.	Moving social obligations to the contractors, while allowing competition amongst contractors. Redistribution upwards
Self-identification as “tech company” providing “services” as well as hidden web-based and more fragmented microtask-based services through online platforms and crowdsourcing.	Fragmentation of service provision, detachment from labor rights. Lack of accountability	Regulation under trade in services in contrast to employment. Forum shifting to commercial policy.	Digital exceptionalism, low compensation for fragmented tasks. Detachments from minimum pay requirements
Focus on private oversight and voluntary insurance for contractors in contrast to statutory social security. Charitable and voluntary support to contractors	Emphasis on charity and voluntary measures in contrast to rights.	Move towards private regulation and provision of social security—privatization of regulation.	Upwards redistribution with charitable measures. Understanding social security as voluntary and charitable.
Promotion of social security as a market-based service through voluntary partnerships. Expansion to insurance markets for commercial “micro-insurance” for task-based work, while utilizing access to data for risk adjustment and premiums	Moving social security from statutory requirement towards a market-based commodity with new commercial potential.	Commercialization of social security through creation of markets and emphasis on voluntary partnerships, benefits from utilizing data for risk-adjustment and premiums.	Redistribution upwards through commercialization of social security through insurance markets. Data utilization for commercial gain.
Investment led corporate business model with focus on growth, expansion, access to venture capital, and market dominance as defining factors for success, rather than productivity and profitability. Importance of tax management	Emphasis on business model, which undermines social rights and societal resource-base through tax management.	Business model building on avoidance of ordinary societal measures, including taxation to enhance social cohesion. Avoidance and disruption of social regulatory measures and obligations.	Redistribution upwards through business model, which takes advantage of avoidance of existing social and societal obligations.

While attention has been focused on the side of the plight of workers and precarity in platform economy (Schor et al. 2020; Behrendt et al. 2019; European Commission 2021a, b), it has broader ramifications for corporate presence and where and how global social policies are made. Corporations prefer to operate under a commercial policy context, which provides a legal framework for trade in services as well as for the protection of intellectual property rights and trade secrets. In many instances, the legal framework of trade in services enables avoiding not only minimum wage requirements, but also more broadly employer responsibilities in relation to those who perform the actual tasks, such as driving or delivering. In the platform economy, the discussions on intellectual property rights are often linked to the issues of transparency of algorithmic management (Schneider 2018).

The sole focus on commercial policy context is maintained by the specification of workers as “contractors” and/or fragmentation of work into small tasks and specific services, which are governed more under services economy and trade in services. In contrast to employment contracts, “partner” contracts can provide more power for the labor platform company in oversight of those who perform tasks. Major part of the governance of employer/employee relationship under international and national laws remains tied or related to employment status. This has provided ground for observations of the platform economy move from public to private regulation (Boudreau and Hagiú 2009; Oppegard et al. 2020). Contractual disagreements between “contractors” and the platform company can be settled by corporate arbitration practices and/or court cases. Investment agreements strengthen the role of arbitration and power

differences between platform companies and “partners” and are more private than court cases. Court cases have been important in bringing attention to workers’ concerns. One example has been the avoidance of general minimum wage requirements, which has become addressed in court cases and complaints (De Stefano et al. 2021). Our driver interviews confirmed the importance of power difference between global corporations and drivers especially in relation to the one-sided power and right of disconnection by platform corporations.

This “asocial” business strategy has prevailed with the expansion of services and thus has become legitimated by investor choices. While it has been shown that digital labor platform companies, such as Uber have been vulnerable to reputational damage, this has resulted more in accommodating gender and diversity strategies, than practices supporting labor rights and ensuring social protection of platform workers. This emphasis is reflected in Uber’s white paper (2021) and the business strategies of Wolt, Doordash, and many other platform companies. Investor preference for funding and rewarding socially disruptive business models remains crucial for maintaining the “disruptive” role of platform companies. The fifth element thus drives the implicit acceptability of the first four measures. To make the case simple, if investors would not reward such practices, platform companies would not gain investment.

Global social policy. Global social policy can be understood from a variety of perspectives (Yeates and Holden 2022; Kaasch et al. 2019). Here we focus on global level social policy, where institutional actors, legal agreements and conventions, broader

political and policy declarations as well different global policy actors shape and influence social policy options at the national and local levels through a variety of avenues. The United Nations Commission for Social Development has had oversight of 1995 World Summit for Social Development, but in practice, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) remains the key actor for global social policy (Deacon 2007). The ILO has defined what it considers, for example, as social health protection and statutory social security. Statutory social security is defined both on the grounds of global agreements and normative guidance, such as ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No 202) (2012) as well as through further national requirements. The ILO has set requirements for social health protection, which explicitly excludes voluntary commercial insurance as such option (ILO 2008). Thus, unless publicly mandated, voluntary commercial health insurance has not been considered as part of social health protection by the ILO. Governments are required to ensure social protection for their citizens, which includes also those working for the platform economy. Digitalization of work does not make social protection impossible (Weber 2018). Furthermore, it could contribute to structural change towards more sustainable and just policies in lower- and middle-income contexts (Cook and Rani 2023). Governments have a role to play as access to national markets is predicated on compliance with national laws. The crucial role of governments in ensuring access to social and health protection is reiterated in human rights provisions and commitments on universal health coverage (United Nations 2019; OHCHR 2022). We can thus claim, that while the generosity of statutory social security can differ, it is a matter for governments and not merely for individual workers and markets to ensure this. The ILO (2021) has analyzed how platform work is rooted in the wider platform economy, and what are global challenges for workers' protection especially in in middle- and low-income countries. The European Union directive proposal on employment presumption also draws from ILO recommendation 198 on employment relationship (ILO 2006).

Throughout 2019–2022 the COVID-19 pandemic has brought up also social security requirements and new models for basic income to the global front (De Wispelaere and Morales 2021; Alston 2019). During COVID-19, taxi sector was hit by closures, distancing and increased remote work. The crises led Uber to launch a Work Hub allowing drivers to find alternative gig work, e.g., Uber Eats (food deliveries), Uber Freight (trucking) and Uber Works (blue-collar shifts) (Rani and Dhir 2020). Furthermore, the Pandemic led, for example, the Uber CEO to ask that drivers would be included in the Trump stimulus package (Lee 2020). A decoupling of social policy priorities from mostly work-related arrangements has been discussed in the context of platform work. Schoukens (2020) suggests that the emphasis should be on income protection rather than protecting access to salaried work. Behrendt et al. (2019) have articulated how different forms of contributory and non-contributory social policy would best protect platform workers. A key question is what kind of social policy measures will follow and to what extent these become reflected on the global agenda. World Summit for Social Development proposed by UN Secretary-General Guterrez (2021) will need to tackle not only post-pandemic measures, but it needs to provide insight into digitalization, employment, and social protection in the era of the platform economy.

ILO is not the only global organization engaged with labor rights and regulatory policies as OECD has had its focus on the Future of Work (OECD 2021, 2014). From a digital labor platform company perspective, the OECD operates more conveniently on the commercial policy side, while the ILO is a tripartite organization and more geared in support of statutory social security. The close relationship with OECD is reflected in

the OECD forum statement under Uber's "Better deal" white paper (Uber 2021) stating that: "Uber's contributions to our Forum Engagement Group on the Future of Work around innovating social protection and skills recognition have made a genuine difference to promote peer learning, best practice, and help to get actionable solutions fit for the 21st century." Platform companies are likely to be more comfortable with organizations, where they can emphasize their promise of new and innovative tech companies for the future of work in the context of commercial policies. The position and role of international organizations can be supportive to common models of operation, but corporations also engage with "forum shopping" towards a more corporate-friendly operational environment, models, and context (Murphy and Kellow 2013).

Global social policy initiatives draw from a national context or practice. In the case of platform companies, the reference case and initial "battleground" has often been the United States, where social and especially health care costs are the obligation of the employer. Health insurance was a key concern in the debates concerning foundational labor laws and contributed to platform company lobbying for California Proposition 22 to exclude app workers from foundational labor laws in the United States. California digital labor platforms lobbying on the Proposition 22 reached a record 203 USD million (Dubal 2021). While the proposition included a reference to 120% minimum wage, this does not consider waiting time. Health insurance contributions by employers are higher in the United States than in many European Union countries with national health systems, but costs of social protection matter in the European Union as well. For example, in Finland, the platform company can save 34.4% on wages, if the social insurance costs are shifted to the contractor or self-employed person (Perkiö et al. 2021). Digital labor platforms thus have substantial reasons and resources to gain. Platform companies seek to influence and shape social protection directly through legal cases as well as indirectly through pushing operations to the context of commercial policies with implications to policy contents as well as to democratic accountability and decision-making within societies. While the disruptive expansion of platform economy companies in Europe has created new challenges, especially to the European social model, the emerging efforts to reign in and improve the working conditions of platform workers is a test of how and through which governance avenues the EU can and will seek to address contemporary societal challenges. However, the legal cases provide avenues also for countermeasures and legislative acts, which could counteract corporate priorities and enhance social protection (Table 2).

In addition to UN organizations and the OECD active in the field of social policy, commercial policy governance has implications for the practice of global social policy. The focus on commercial policy and services trade shifts global social policy governance from the sphere of governance dominated by governments and in the case of the ILO tripartite focus with trade unions and employers, to the context of governance shaped disproportionately by global economic actors (G8, Davos) and practiced through international trade and investment agreements, which are more amenable to global corporate and investor priorities. Global platforms and platform providers require multilateral protection for their operation, protection of intellectual property and access to data. However, this comprehensiveness of trade and investment agreements has implications also to other policy areas (Rodrik 2018), such as social policies.

The challenge to the European social model. The starting point for operational presence is of key importance and in Europe the

Table 2 Examples of strategic social policy dimensions of platform economy with examples of countermeasures and potential concrete policy measures to counter and limit wider implications from platform economy.

Strategic social policy dimension	Countermeasures	Potential solutions	Reasoning/examples
Employment status denial and avoidance—importance of trade and corporate law for global operators vs. social and employment law. Statutory social protection and rights tied to employment in many countries. Self-identification as “tech company” providing “services”. In online services race to the bottom. Micro, task-based, and exploitative arrangements VS. compliance with sectoral requirements. Focus on private oversight and voluntary insurance for contractors. Implicit assumption of social protection as a charity VS. statutory social security and accountability of contractors. Promotion of social security as a market-based service through voluntary partnerships and charity VS. improving data access for social protection and social protection through public and non-commercial forms. Investment led corporate business model VS. using scope for direction of public investment as well as reputation, values, and principles for private investors. Highlighting social risk and responsibility.	Limiting possibilities to avoid employer position and/or expanding key obligations to all workers. Presumption of employment—moving burden of proof to the stronger participant/platform provider. Scrutiny on what can be understood as service, sharing data on service use for social protection, limits to exploitation. Oversight and transparency of crowdsourcing practices. Access to data. Compliance with statutory requirements for contractors and outsourcing of workforce. Support to best practices and social innovations in industry, platform accountability and responsibility. Regulatory oversight on market-based arrangements and conflicts of interests. Requirements of compliance with statutory requirements, including for privacy of contractors. Access to data for social protection. Corporate social responsibility requirements to cover platform providers and arrangements to “partners”. Public investment and pension fund criteria for investment. Questioning socially disruptive investment practices.	Strengthening global and regional regulatory contexts. Transparency and scrutiny of online platform work practices. Enhance support to those who work with global platforms for realization of rights and accountability. Formalization of contracts, regulation of online work with disturbing materials. Oversight on channeling online tasks-based work through gateways. Limits and bans to prison work and child labor. Strengthening public oversight and mandatory statutory requirements. Global and regional agreements in support of national measures. Trade unions, collective bargaining. Strengthening social protection oversight, regulation, and transparency. Establishment of public, cooperative, and other non-commercial options for social security arrangements. Basic income. Sustainability- and wellbeing -led investment model. Platforms as means to compliance and contribution to social security for those self-employed working through platforms as they gather data. Socially responsible platform work models supported.	EU initial proposal on rebuttal of employment status. ILO agreements and labor conventions, focus on all workers, including self-employed. Case: Litigation and court-cases across countries on employment status. National, regional, and global regulatory measures and oversight. Comparison to “like” work in non-platform industries and operational frameworks. Case: ECJ decision on Uber as transport service. National and international public accountability and oversight of corporate practices and compliance with social security. Case: Statutory requirements in welfare states. Social security as human and social right with statutory requirements. Data sharing requirements for work to build contributory social protection funds. Case: Scope for cooperatives in the platform economy. Public investment and pension fund accountability. Making harder to invest in socially irresponsible corporate practices. Socially responsible investment practices. Case: WHO FCTC case on Investment and tobacco, ILO work on corporate social responsibility

The examples and measures presented are indicative and not exhaustive.

more aggressive disruptive politics of platform economy operators have gained more resistance. Uber Technologies Inc. followed in Europe initially similar disruptive strategy as in the United States, which included, for example, influence on the liberalization of taxi sector reforms in Nordic countries (Thelen 2018). It was involved with court cases at the European Union and national levels (European Court of Justice 2017; Mackay and Powell 2018; ETUC 2021; London Employment Tribunal 2016). The leaked Uber files have in 2022 shown close connections to decision-makers in several countries (Davies et al. 2022). In Russia, its impact was mediated via local actors and associated with the formalization largely informal taxi market and more private regulatory oversight of taxi sector. Several platform companies reshaped the entire market of taxi and delivery services in Russia, while succeeding digitalized services operated within the almost unchanged regulatory setting in a part of transportation services, labor, and social policy. However, while information technology has provided means for “private regulation” on the quality of services in particular markets, the social impact in higher income countries has focused more on the potential of avoiding social protection obligations and moving social protection costs and risks to the drivers/couriers. This has resulted in legal cases and “Riders law” for couriers in Spain as well as loss of permission in the UK (Topham 2019; IRL 2020; Eurofound 2021). Not complying with the “Riders law” led Spanish labor ministry to fine the platform company Glovo with

79 million euros in 2022 (Heller 2022). However, this forms only a minor part of the costs, which the parent company Delivery Hero expects to reach in the range of 200–400 million euros (Delivery Hero 2023, 34). Platform corporations have also begun to consider or utilize subcontracting for employment requirements, which has been criticized as the “new normal” or plan B for platform companies (Wray 2021). This is in line with a wider practice towards preference for subcontracting and outsourcing, which has been seen to lead to “fissured” workplaces (Weil 2019). This practice results also from investor pressure to focus on the most profitable parts of the business (Weil 2019). However, it has major implications for workers. In many ways the behavior of platform companies is not that novel, but part of wider practices of global corporations and investor preference. For example, a recent EU JRC study concluded that in France outsourced workforce faced wage penalties in comparison to workers (Fana et al. 2022). Platform companies’ operational model thus draws from the benefits of fissured work. This has been seen as a kind of “technofeudalism” with similar ethical and societal impacts across countries worsening inequalities and accountability of global corporations (Muntaner and Benach 2024; Varoufakis 2023).

At the same time, digital labor platform companies can adjust and operate in a more regulated environment. In response to demands from regulator and workers, Foodora (Delivery Hero) couriers are hired on part-time employment contracts in Norway. In Norway, Sweden and Denmark, delivery workers have the

right to negotiate collectively and to strike (Ilsoe and Jesnes 2020; Oppgaard et al. 2020). They also provide data, which could be seen to contribute towards the formalization of informal work. Governments can thus engage with countermeasures, though at best these would be backed by support and legitimacy as a result of regional or global agreements. In Finland, the situation with delivery worker status is currently under scrutiny with conflicting results from cases in labor council and regional administrative courts (TEM 2020a, b; Yle 2024). Changes at the national level seem to proceed on the grounds of activities of local regulatory officials as has been the case in London, where Uber license has been on hold twice (Amaxopoulou et al. 2021; Ayata and Önay 2021). Countermeasures to ensure social and health protection thus relate not only to global but as well to regional and local policy options (Table 3). Governments can restrict the entry of platform companies if they have not complied with national laws. When these countermeasures relate to social protection requirements or mode of working, they will directly exclude alternative operators, however, if restrictions apply to other factors local competitors may not provide any better or more socially responsible services. Exclusion or banning exploitative platform services can be a solution, but this can also be done simply to enhance the position of local providers. Indeed, in many countries global and international operators could contribute to moving standards for social protection upwards.

Challenges for regulatory and labor measures have been addressed at the national or local level. From a social policy perspective, challenges do not only apply to employment regulation, but as well to taxation and tax avoidance and management (Ayata and Önay 2021). For example, report on Uber tax evasion indicated that the company used more than 50 Dutch shell companies for tax avoidance (CICTAR 2021). Delivery Hero (2023) financial reports refer to transfer pricing, which is frequently used for tax management purposes. While corporations usually prioritize local negotiation practices over transnational, the digital labor platform companies have also sought European Union competence, especially about competition policy. In 2021, the European Commission made a proposal, which includes DG competition guidance on allowing for collective bargaining as well as a directive proposal on improving working conditions of platform workers, regulating employment status, and aspects of algorithmic management (European Commission 2021a, b). It follows wider EU focus on the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act for which political agreement was achieved in spring 2022 (European Commission 2022a, b). On the 12th of June 2023 European Council stated it would start to negotiate with the European Parliament on the employment rights of platform workers (European Council 2023a). The process has been long with claims of watering down the initial proposal, especially on how employment status is considered in the proposal (European Council 2023b). This is not surprising as how employment status is defined and considered will be of importance to several other dimensions of workers' rights and obligations for employers in the region. In early February a provisional deal was approved between the European Parliament and Council (European Parliament 2024). In late February four Member States, France, Germany, Estonia, and Greece, were blocking the fate of the proposal (Ahlberg 2024). On 11th of March European Council confirmed agreement on the directive (European Council 2024a). However, while the directive opens first time scope for regulatory measures on algorithmic management, the key provision on rebuttable presumption of employment became vaguer and more limited, including with respect to scope to apply it in relation to proceedings on tax, social security, or criminal matters (European Council 2024b).

Utilizing focus on corporate social responsibility. If investors shape how corporations operate, new proposals for social investment could also shape the future of platform economy companies. Expectations from investor guidance, may, however, be premature. While environmentally friendly or green investments have grown slowly, the consideration of socially sustainable investment has been more limited if not partially understood by investors (Johnstone 2022). For example, such measures can result in an assessment of companies both with doing well and doing good (e.g., supporting social, governance and green investment). However, doing good tends to be assessed by measures, that represent gender equity and green patents, but not necessarily on how companies treat their workers or subcontractors (Siegert et al. 2021). Furthermore, if doing well and doing good are foreseen as mutually enforcing, this opens a convenient growth option and loophole for industries to undermine broader social policy context while complying with more narrow measurement indices. This is reflected also in the wider OECD focus on multinational enterprises and digital platforms, where questions on AI, human rights, and privacy have become more prominent (OECD 2020). However, while the focus on corporate social responsibility has been on green and charitable measures, it is possible to consider the wider role of platform corporations concerning corporate social responsibility and accountability of social and societal implications for their actions. This would imply that corporate social responsibility is seen as complementary rather than alternative to labor protection. This could be relevant for online work and task-based work, where it is possible to ban or blacklist exploitative practices and consider corporate social responsibility in a wider context, where relations with partners and outsourcing are part of overall company corporate social responsibility.

It would be prudent to say that tech and in particular labor platforms—selling human labor services—have prioritized doing well over doing good in practice. While labor platform companies recognize the public relations challenges involved with social sustainability and reputational damage, both platform companies and investors currently lack incentives to support more socially sustainable action. This can be seen in engagement with “solutions for social protection” for their partners while refusing to become employers, increase pay, or require statutory social protection from their “partners”. Thus, solutions are the ones, that would not affect business interests, but either open the scope for more business engagement or leave the responsibility to the workers or government. However, the politics of collective bargaining are also associated with efforts to avoid employer status and remain in the sphere of commercial policy governance. This is well reflected in the contribution Wolt (currently part of Doordash. Inc.) in response to the Commission consultation on collective bargaining (Laurinkari 2021):

“More broadly, we think that policymakers should strive for a tailored framework for platform-enabled delivery services, which should be built on the following four core elements:

Collective bargaining: Self-employed partners should have the ability to organize themselves in representative organizations and conclude collective bargaining agreements with platforms, covering relevant areas for platform-enabled work, such as compensation and benefits.

Tax and social security contributions: Platforms should be allowed to pay social security and tax contributions on behalf of their courier partners.

Table 3 Responding to global social policy challenges at different levels of governance, examples of potential activities and responses assuming that conditions of online work remain a national concern, while on-location work through platforms depends more on local context.

Social policy measures and level of governance	Global measures	Regional/Federal	National/State	Local/City
Employment-related social protection obligations	Framework convention for Global Social Contract	Requirements set for social protection	Detailed requirements and levels of social protection	Oversight on compliance with provision
Accident insurance	Oversight and notification Terms of practices	Requirements set for adequate protection	Oversight for permissions for all online workers	Oversight on permissions for all on-location workers
Occupational health and safety requirements	Terms of assessment of requirements	Requirements set for AI and algorithmic use	Oversight for permissions for online workers	Oversight of relevant sectors and on-location workers, permits
Minimum income	Terms and principles of minimum income	Framework for defining minimum income	Legislation and requirements for minimum income	Oversight on adequacy of reimbursement in on-location work, permits
Collective bargaining	Rights to collective bargaining	Oversight on rights to collective bargaining/across countries	Obligation to ensure collective bargaining	Establishment of platform work tribunals for each platform operator
Unfair dismissal/disconnection	Terms for proceeding on dismissal/disconnection, elaboration of unfair practices	Oversight on principles and practices across countries	Oversight on practices and compliance, legal tribunals	Licenses and permits for on-location platform work, legal accountability in courts and tribunals
Exploitative practices	Banning/limiting through global agreement and oversight (e.g., slave labor) Principles for data sharing	Oversight on compliance across countries	Oversight on practices and compliance within countries	Licenses and permits for on-location platform work
Data sharing requirements		Details for legal operation and contracting/across jurisdictions	National permits and purposes—oversight on levels of business	Local operational permits, licenses, and purposes
Privacy requirements	Principles and overall requirements	Details for legal permits/ across jurisdictions	National permits and oversight	Local operational licenses and purposes
Corporate social responsibility	Framework convention for corporate social responsibility	Implications arising from cross-border measures, civil society and workers action	National obligations for corporate social responsibility, permits and oversight	Requirements for compliance with CSR for operational permits
Transparency	Principles and overall requirements for transparency	Details for legal permits/ across jurisdictions	National permits and oversight	Local operational licenses and purposes

These represent examples of options to highlight range of available potential actions to address social impact of platform economy in addition to existing instruments and ILO conventions.

Benefits: Platforms should be allowed to provide their self-employed partners protections and benefits (such as insurance, sick pay, holiday pay etc.) without legal risk.

Legal status: To increase legal certainty for platforms and courier partners, there should be clear rules defining platform-enabled delivery providers as self-employed under the condition that a) the platform does not set any dates, times of day, or minimum hours the courier should be logged onto the platform, b) the platform does not require the courier to accept any specific delivery tasks, c) the platform does not restrict couriers' ability to offer their services on other platforms, d) the platform does not restrict couriers' ability to work for other companies or running businesses."

Global corporations may not have specific or explicit stances for social policy, but they may have an implicit one. From a social policy perspective Wolt's contribution may seem progressive, but while the tone suggests friendliness it is still based in avoidance of employer status with emphasis on voluntary corporate measures and partnerships. This is because the realization of workers' rights and redistribution is set under employment law. This is why countermeasures and solutions for the situation reside in governments taking a stronger role not only at local or national levels, but at regional and global levels to enable regulatory action for cross-border services. Uber's lobbying of governments has also become a point of dispute since the Uber files (Davies et al. 2022). While Uber has since presented a socially friendlier public strategy (Uber 2021), lobbying has continued. This has been evident in claims of Uber's influence on French government stances and the role of France in turning down the directive with an alternative proposal (Chaibi 2024; Bourgeny-Gonse 2023; European Parliament 2022).

Platform companies, such as Uber, have gained reputational ground as "disruptors". Uber has been reported to directly take profit from a claimed safety-related charge in the early days (Isaac 2019). As a California-based global corporation, it has been known for its strong libertarian twist because of such emphasis by its founder and long-time CEO Travis Kalanick (Rosenblat 2018; Shontell 2014). While we may dismiss excesses as a "startup" dream or "tech" priority, politics on avoidance of social and health protection costs and shifting of risks to individuals should not be dismissed as a gentle bias of innovators, but a political choice of those in charge of companies and those investing in these companies. Uber later openly promoted portability of benefits and engagement with innovative and commercial options together with trade union representatives (Rolf et al. 2018). However, Uber's actual engagement with pension schemes has been associated with court cases obliging the company to do so (Uber BV vs. Aslan 2019). Litigation has thus been an important part of countermeasures against disruptive practices and in practice shaped practices, but further scope for countermeasures can be seen in the behavior of public investors and in shaping how private investors consider corporate social responsibility.

While the rise of Uber and its corporate culture has been documented by Isaac (2019), it is important to note that while the excesses led to the demise of the CEO Kalanick, it did not undermine the operational business model of Uber. While the toxicity for investors was initially shaped by how drivers were treated, Uber has not changed its operational focus and has given in only after court cases. In the summer 2022 the Guardian Newspaper published so-called "Uber Files", which showed widespread company lobbying both on Commission and Member States (Davies et al. 2022). While Uber has been the focus of legal action in several countries, it has adjusted actions after court cases

(Ayata and Önay 2021). In the United States Uber has been threatened by a class-action suit by drivers and passengers as well as government action for discriminating against disabled passengers (Spates et al. vs. Uber 2021; Conger 2021). Furthermore, broader social protection issues have only slowly emerged into a broader light as result of the court cases and do not seem to have affected greatly investor trust in Uber. The "solutions" thus reside in governments taking note and imposing—together—tighter social requirements for platform economy providers.

The social void enabling the emergence of "platformisation".

In the Uber model, riders use an app or web interface to send to Uber's platform a travel request, which is directed to a driver who will perform the transportation service for compensation. The platform later positioned itself as a "marketplace" which was collecting from drivers a fee for its services. A similar model was picked up by many other platforms: algorithmic management (the automated system of matching demand and supply, controlling the prices, the productivity of labor, and quality of service) and reassigning most of the running costs from the platform company to worker. The change in industry was so fundamental that it is justified to articulate this change as "platformisation". The existing sharp inequalities in societies and gaps in regulation enabled platformisation, as well the lack of adequate focus on self-employed and outsourcing practices within industries. This has become possible also because of increasing commercial focus on trade in services, opening the scope for buying services without the burden of employer costs. This has direct implications for redistribution. The lack of action by governments through national and international measures has contributed to and supported the emergence of the platform economy, however, they will be the key to reclaiming regulatory policy space and in addressing the consequences of inaction.

The inequality in labor market has been manifested in the growing precarisation of labor and is often seen through the lens of precarisation of work (Schor et al. 2020; Crouch 2019), where "platformisation" can be seen as one endpoint in the process in moving beyond zero hours work. On-location platform work is often carried out either by youth or immigrants, who can have limited resources to protect their labor rights. Platforms such as Uber affect lower- and middle-class employment by replacing them with gig jobs, which have weaker social security coverage (Zwick 2018). "Platformisation" has thus implied the rise of informal work also in high-income countries affecting rights and access to social security.

Uber work model of self-employed contractors has been seen to erode social security in comparison to salaried work (Isaac 2014; Drahokoupil and Piasna 2017; Tran and Sokas 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic boosted the public interest in platform economy, teleworking and platform-mediated flexible work (ILO 2021). At the same time, it also unveiled the weaknesses of this model. Ever-growing IT capabilities such as AI and algorithmic management may set platformisation to serve as a model for future business and governance in an information society. While "platformisation" has come to represent a particular model of moving from employment to contractors while shifting costs and risks to the weaker partner, it is important to note that this has not been an issue for investors or contractors. This is the case, especially with respect to "hidden" platform work and online service and micro task work (Jones 2021; Altenried 2020). A wider concern of platformisation is also the way in which it can open scope for other industries to utilize platform status to avoid full employer responsibilities and outsource work. It is thus important not to fall into digital exceptionalism, but to assess the

impact of platformisation on wider services provision and organization and the basis of social protection. This is also where the solutions provided by platform companies are of interest.

The five strategic emphases of the platform economy for global social policy are of importance to both how these will become reflected both at the national level and at the level of implicit or explicit global social policy. We already have countermeasures applied by governments, regional entities, and international organizations. These include countermeasures in Table 2. Countermeasures now take three main avenues for influence: (1) regulation and regulatory principles, (2) litigation, and (3) enabling alternative more socially responsible forms of work, for example, through support to cooperatives (e.g., <https://platform.coop/>). However, the lobbying of Proposition 22 (California, 2020) and the European Union directive on improving platform work (European Commission 2021a) have shown how substantial lobbying by global corporations can be and how they can influence decision-making. It is thus important to point out that action towards countermeasures amongst platform workers, trade unions, and social activists represents a political countermeasure with learning from litigation and mobilization across countries. While in low and middle-income countries market-based contesting of platform corporations take place more through competition by local, often even more socially disruptive providers, the global corporate “branding” and multinational presence enables political, trade union, and social mobilization across countries and globally.

Platform economy shaping of the global social policy “solutions”. As a result of criticism, platform economy operators, trade unions and social activists have come back with proposals for countermeasures and “solutions”. Potential new avenues for global social policy can be divided into: (1) compliance with statutory obligations vs. charitable and voluntary partnerships with insurance industry, where risk and obligations carried by the corporation and/or platform workers, (2) extending and strengthening statutory social security requirements with formal obligations for new types of digital work vs. creating new “exceptional” limited options, (3) individual social safety nets provided by corporations for their workers vs. provision of data to enable contributory share of workers towards statutory social security not tied to specific corporations, (4) government support in the form of basic income or other benefits vs. corporate requirements for compliance with social protection and contributory share, and (5) compliance with specific minimum requirements and limits for worker status (UK) or “light” social security (Proposition 22, “third option”) vs. compliance with requirements arising from full employment status. Each of the measures that platform companies propose provides scope for alternative approaches, which should be considered as part of countermeasures and more long-term solutions.

The first option for platform corporations is the re-establishment of social security as a voluntary commercial option in contrast to compliance with statutory social security. We can see such articulation, for example, in the responses of Wolt—a delivery courier company—to the European Commission competition inquiry (Laurinkari 2021), emphasizing the importance of supporting social security for their partners in compliance with requirements of collective bargaining. Uber has teamed with private insurance provider AXA for drivers to provide schemes to common social risks (Uber 2021). Our driver interviews in London indicate that drivers have limited knowledge of the voluntary schemes and only a few have been relying on those with a minor contribution to drivers’ wellbeing. Moreover, image gains to Uber are substantial. The new private partnerships can provide political and financial benefits for corporations. While this type of

partnerships can provide companies further response to claims on lack of social security, they can also provide means for data sharing to undercut costs in formal markets and undercut other insurance providers. At the same time expanding through partnerships allows compliance with corporate views due to mutually enforcing business interests in providing services as well as showing corporate voluntary action. Corporate schemes can also be used as models for more widely marketable concepts. Voluntary measures are welcome, but these need to be assessed against more far-reaching alternatives to understand their wider policy relevance. While collective bargaining will allow organization of platform workers, it is possible to enhance initial and supporting focus on corporate social responsibility through national and global oversight and civil society action. Corporate social responsibility often relies too much on self-reporting and voluntary codes designed and proposed by the industry, undermining the potential for change. The global social policy mix promoted by platform companies is thus not merely one of libertarian lack of government involvement, but as well one, where government protection is sought in securing presence and rights under commercial policy associated with further commercialization of social and health protection. As result, we have strongly individualized and commercially driven measures without redistribution of risks or resources or potentially regressive redistribution of resources. This would be a failure of global social policy if considered from the perspective of rights, regulation, and redistribution (Deacon 2007; Deacon et al. 2005). Yet on the other hand, the emerging evidence seems to show that platform companies are not fully resistant but comply with judgments of litigation even if companies have sought “light” option through the establishment of a “third category” or “worker status”. Furthermore, the companies hold data, which could be used to formalize informal work and expand social protection in practice. The more limited “solutions” promoted by companies can thus undermine the wider prospects for solutions, which could be achieved for social protection in platform work or digital social protection (Weber 2018).

The establishment of the third category or “worker status” draws from legislation and litigation, which have imposed some obligations on platform companies. In practice, the California 22 decision has some resemblance to the worker status, which has emerged as an option in the United Kingdom (Mackay and Powell 2018). French legislation has been close to the “third option” and influenced how the directive has become developed and discussed (Spasova and Marengo 2022). It is, however, important to consider platform work not only concerning specifics of on-location work but as a potential model which could challenge the wider existence of ordinary employment. The relevance of the third option for global social policy thus draws from the scope of platformisation of employment relationships in standard workplaces towards the less extensive “worker status” and outsourcing. In ordinary workplaces, employers could take advantage of this and move towards platform-mediated work with a wider and amplifying impact for the global social policy context through the erosion of employment protection. While achieving “light” social protection would be an achievement globally for informal workers, it would at the same time effectively set a new “normal” for global regulatory practice and what can be required from corporations previously known as employers. It is thus crucial that countermeasures and “solutions” are examined not as exceptional models, but in the light of what these new models could imply for employment more widely.

The question of the third category or worker status is at the core of European Commission proposals (Aloisi et al. 2023). It draws from ILO recommendation 198 on employment relationships (ILO 2006). While the EU proposal (European Commission

2021a, b) on the presumption of employment was initially approved by many Member States, trade unions, and traditional industries, it remained a point of disagreement for some Member States (European Council 2023a, b). How these conditions will ultimately be defined will form the regulatory context for platform work in Europe and is likely to have repercussions on broader global social policy and governance with direct implications to social protection, inequality, and labor rights.

On the other hand, corporations would be most interested in keeping regulatory measures outside core corporate interests concerning trade secrets, data and algorithmic management, which are likely to be of more importance for corporate assets and value (Tang et al. 2020). The politics and future profits of the “default option” for platform companies to remain as “pure” tech companies are set in licensing or franchising measures or seeking a service provider status to sell data services for “customers”. This would allow to continue business as usual and maintain the ownership of data and algorithmic management. This is reflected already in the Russian taxi parks and the EU Court of Justice’s decision on star taxi (European Court of Justice 2017). Outsourcing and franchising operations can provide legal “employment” relationship under more fissured workplaces (Weil 2019), yet at the same time merely shift risk and responsibility to the subcontractor and platform workers.

In Table 1, we addressed solutions from the perspective of the platform industry, whereas in Table 2 we have compiled potential alternative solutions in the light of more socially sustainable future. These rely—necessarily—upon global, regional, and local public policies, but as well emerging understanding of the importance of global social governance for all countries. As data rich actors, platform providers and platform economy could have a positive role for social protection and formalization of informal work more globally, but as result of the current business model, there is a risk of moving backward in countries with more comprehensive social protection and welfare systems, if the business model is shifted to other services.

Global social policies and policy options are shaped not only by nation states and labor conventions, but increasingly by trade and investment related agreements, organizations, and business and investor related forums such as the World Trade Organisation, the OECD, and the World Economic Forum. The avoidance of employer status is reflected also in how the United Nations, or the ILO regulations, recommendations, and conventions are interpreted and applied to platform industries. Multinational corporations and platforms are affected also by negotiations on human rights, transnational corporations, and other business enterprises as well as UN guiding principles on business and human rights (United Nations 2011). In this article we have not directly dealt with questions on surveillance, AI and wider ethical remits of algorithmic management and platform economy, which are likely to gain ground in future. The wider focus on ethics and platform economy is often geared towards AI, algorithmic management, privacy, and surveillance. Tan et al. (2021) have divided ethics debates on platform economy to those that relate to how work is organized and power differences (e.g., right to disconnect), what it entails (e.g., algorithmic management), and the lack of protection and precarity. These all contribute to the wider social policy. However, in terms of platform corporations and labor, Bieber (2022) has emphasized the power imbalance as the root cause of threats to social justice. From global social policy and social protection perspective, the ethical dimension related to lack of protection and precarity remains central.

Globally social policy reference has been set to ILO agreements and wider UN commitments, including sustainable development goals and commitments to social protection floors (SDG 1.3), universal health coverage (SDG3.8), and concerning human

rights commitments. Current negotiations concerning the UN Social Commission have had oversight on the global social agenda since the 1995 Social Summit, which will now be revisited in the World Social Summit (2025). The COVID-19 Pandemic has demonstrated the fragility of social policy arrangements and the UN Secretary General Guterres (2020) has called for stronger social protection and contract. It is essential that negotiations on “global social contract” consider the scope and potential of regulation of global platform economy as well as how investors and financialisation can shape and legitimize practices under platform economy. There is no reason why global platform companies could not contribute to societies both through paying taxes and in ensuring social protection for their workers. The World Social Summit could become forum to enable a future social contract and action on socially disruptive global policies and practices. The court cases on employment, litigation, and protests of platform workers have in themselves formed a wider global context for a common cause (Bessa et al. 2022; Chaibi 2024). The global presence of platform companies can thus provide a shared experience across countries (Lehdonvirta 2022).

Politics of platformisation—conclusions. In this article we have sought to illuminate how platformisation represents a particular global social policy. While global social policy approaches have emphasized the role of precarious and informal work, the focus has been more on the decline of working conditions and contractual rights. Information technology innovations have enabled wider scope for platform work, but this does not require a shift towards outsourcing or new entrepreneurialism, which are political, not technical choices. Algorithmic surveillance and data gathering would make it in practice technically easier to cover people under social protection. Furthermore, platformisation could produce more detailed data and lead towards formalization of informal subcontracting, which could have been used for public good. Instead, this data remains private under the realm of trade secrets. Contracts between platform companies and their workers are not typical business contracts due to the highly unequal context. In this respect platformisation and politics of platform work represent the hard end of the precarious work spectrum with increased surveillance and risk shifting to often vulnerable individuals.

The focus on the role of employment status is a key factor for global social policy. The lack of coverage for those self-employed has remained a concern in social protection and created gaps between those in permanent full-time employment and those with short-term or part-time work already before the establishment of the platform economy. Ethical choices concerning social protection mustn’t be hidden behind technological change. It is important that a global social contract would ensure that technology companies and global multinational industries have a positive contribution to societies and to transformative global social policy toward the wellbeing of all, rather than engagement in disrupting, exploiting, and undermining existing social structures within societies. Technological change and push towards more distance work during the COVID-19 pandemic have implied major expansion of this type of work not only in low and middle-income countries, but as well in high-income countries, creating a new global context of platform work, elaborated in the ILO (2021) strategic outlook on employment.

Current initiatives and focus on platform economy by the ILO and European Commission are complemented by evolving court cases on employment, role of algorithmic management, and the sharing of risks and resources. While compromises, such as the worker status or Proposition 22 have improved position of contractors, they have fallen short of providing rights comparable

to statutory social security within employment. These have also opened scope for further platformisation and shifted forums where and the ways how global social policy takes place for the platform economy. Countermeasures mainly take place at national level and through litigation, but they provide ground for recognition of challenges at global level. In this respect global measures could be seen comparable to Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC), which supports government regulatory measures and policy space for regulation, rather than global or regional regulatory focus. We could envisage a Global Framework Convention for Social Contract and Corporate Social Responsibility, for example, to ensure that especially new tech industries, which may no longer directly employ persons, contribute to the social sustainability of societies.

The response of platform corporations represents a form of global social policy, which operates under commercial policy without contributing to the society or to cross-subsidizing risks and resources. Rather than limiting and safeguarding contractors and “partners” from vagaries of market forces, it expands markets to the provision and organization of social protection as well as scope and applicability for outsourcing to a wider context of employment. While platforms have provided work, the quality of work and contribution to taxes and wider society, apart from service users, have been limited.

The emerging role of platformisation of work as well as emphasis on provision of services rather than employment are likely to have broader repercussions to the scope and options for wider global social policy. This “global social policy package” includes redistributing upwards, avoiding workers’ rights, and undermining regulatory means for enforcement. As a global social policy model, platformisation and policy proposals promoted by labor platform companies indicate a combination, which empowers corporate and commercial priorities over and above those of platform workers and the social sustainability of societies. This is a political choice of governments. It is also possible to envisage an option, where global social justice is central and workers, governments, corporations, and new forms of platformisation move towards a more socially sustainable global social policy accompanied by regulatory measures, data sharing, socially responsible investment, and wider corporate social responsibility requirements. A transformative focus on global social contract could potentially provide an avenue for this.

Data availability

The anonymized data will be available through Finnish Social Science Data Archive after final analyses, but at latest by the end of 2026. Documentary data are publicly available.

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Author contributions

MK envisaged the initial idea and plan for the article; MP, AS, and BM contributed to material gathering, analysis, and commenting of the different versions of the article.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Our research project has ethical approval 54/2020 from Tampere Region’s Humanities Ethics Committee, including for data management plan and archiving.

Informed consent

All interviews included informed consent form and explanation of the study.

Additional information

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