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Neoliberal Governance and the Politics of Platform-Based Gig Work in Southeast Asia

Fernan Talamayan* Ph.D., Independent Scholar

Over the past decade, platform-based delivery and ride-hailing services have expanded rapidly across Southeast Asia, reshaping urban labor markets and daily life. This study examines how platform companies reorganize labor governance in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Using a structured-focused comparative approach, it analyzes four interrelated dimensions of the platform labor regime: wage structures, algorithmic control and work organization, risk and cost shifting, and (the absence of) social protection. Examining these dimensions through the frameworks of platform capitalism and governmentality, the study argues that delivery and mobility platforms operate as instruments of neoliberal governance, disciplining labor through algorithmic management while systematically shifting financial and occupational risks onto workers. The study finds that platform capitalism has deepened the region's labor precarity, even as workers increasingly push back against platform-imposed conditions.

Keywords Platform Capitalism, Neoliberal Governmentality, Gig Economy, Informal Labor, Algorithmic Management, Worker Resistance

I. Introduction

Platform-based delivery and mobility services have rapidly expanded across Southeast Asia over the past decade, transforming everyday life and work in cities from Jakarta to Bangkok to Hanoi (Pingali and Abraham, 2022). Among the key players driving this transformation, a few companies, such as Grab Holdings Inc., GoTo Group, and Delivery Hero, had consolidated control over more than 80 percent of the region's on-demand food delivery and ride-hailing market by early 2020s (Tan and Gong, 2024). This concentrated

* Email: ftalamayan.c@nycu.edu.tw

market power positions a handful of platforms to fundamentally reshape labor in the region.

These platforms promise flexible earning opportunities for drivers and couriers. Yet beneath the glossy rhetoric of digital innovation lies a political economy shaped by platform capitalism—an economic system in which digital platforms mediate work, consumption, and value creation, driven by advances in technology, shifting consumer practices, and changing conceptions of labor (Liang et al., 2022). This study asks: how do platform companies reorganize labor governance and reinforce labor precarity in Southeast Asia, and how do workers respond to and push back against these conditions? Answering this requires close attention to the mechanisms through which the said outcomes are produced and contested, namely algorithmic management, platform-based pricing systems, and contractual arrangements that together allow platforms to generate profit. It also requires examining the broader governance logic at work; the study argues that these platforms operate as instruments of neoliberal governance that commodify and discipline labor through algorithms, exposing workers to heightened risks while offering limited income security and legal safeguards (see Pulignano, 2025 for a related discussion).

Although delivery and mobility platforms have been reshaping labor globally, Southeast Asia provides a significant site for examining the governing logic these platforms endorse and local dynamics they reinforce. Southeast Asia has one of the world's highest rates of informal employment, with more than half of all workers in most countries across the region lacking formal contracts or employment protections (WIEGO, 2023). According to the ASEAN Secretariat's 2025 trend report, the majority of jobs in every member state except Brunei are informal, with Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam recording "the highest rates of vulnerable employment, reaching 80%" (ASEAN, 2025: 19). This reliance on informal work gives platforms fertile ground to exploit a workforce already accustomed to precarious, non-contractual employment and weak social protection.

At the same time, the region's digital gig economy differs markedly from its counterpart in the Global North. For instance, in Jakarta, most platform drivers work full-time, entering gig work not by choice but because formal employment opportunities are scarce (Permana, 2022). A survey of Indonesian ride-hailing drivers suggests that around 450,000 drivers work an average of 54 hours per week, a pattern that stands in sharp contrast to the United Kingdom, where only 8 percent of gig workers exceed 35 hours per week (Permana, 2022). Izzati (2023) adds that up to 2.3 million Indonesians rely on app-based work as their primary source of income, yet labor regulations have not kept pace, leaving most workers without sick leave, while their earnings continue to decline.

This study applies a structured-focused comparison, with each country case—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam—examined using the same set of analytical dimensions: (1) wage structures, (2) algorithmic control and work organization, (3) the shifting of costs and risks onto workers, and (4) social protection (or more accurately, the absence of such protection). The platform labor regime, defined by these dimensions, is treated here as the central unit of analysis across five countries. These countries were selected because they represent major urban markets for motorcycle-based delivery and ride-hailing platforms and vary meaningfully in their regulatory, economic, and labor market contexts. Singapore was particularly excluded because, unlike neighboring Southeast Asian countries, its Platform Workers Act (2024) makes it an outlier in the region. This landmark legislation accords gig workers a distinct legal status and provides protections, mandating work-injury compensation insurance equivalent to employees, recognizing "Platform Work Associations" with collective bargaining rights, and requiring tiered Central Provident Fund contributions.

The study draws on a systematic analysis of diverse sources, including academic studies, policy and institutional reports, survey reports, news reports, and worker testimonies documented in existing literature. However, it must be noted that this study is limited by disparities in the depth and availability of evidence across the five countries examined. Thus, its findings should be read as a first step toward more comprehensive regional comparison, as more balanced and comparable data (including pre- and post-pandemic conditions) across country contexts will be needed to further map the labor governance and resistance patterns this study attempts to outline.

In terms of timeframe, the cases examined were limited to the events occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period during which lock-downs and social distancing measures compelled restaurants to leverage delivery apps and expanded the pool of gig delivery workers as people who lost jobs or income sought alternative livelihoods. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how ill-equipped social assistance schemes were to support informal workers, who typically lack legal recognition and access to social insurance, leaving cash transfers and similar measures insufficient to meet their needs (WIEGO, 2023).

The study is organized as follows. First, it offers a brief review of existing works on the topic. Next, theoretical anchors are discussed to help underline how platform capitalism endorses the exercise of neoliberal governmentality through algorithms, risk-shifting, and the casualization of labor. The study then presents its analysis of working conditions, pay structures, algorithmic management practices, and rider experiences across multiple Southeast Asian countries to highlight local trends and common patterns. It also identifies various forms of resistance aimed at combatting exploitative practices and improving work conditions. In the closing section, the study returns to its salient points and offers a critical reflection on the future of platform labor in Southeast Asia.

II. Platform labor and precarious work

Recent scholarship situates delivery and ride-hailing platforms within the discussion of algorithmic management and its effects on worker's autonomy and well-being. Wood et al. (2019) argued that algorithmic management in gig work simultaneously grants freedoms (e.g., the ability to choose when to log on) while imposing intensive surveillance and performance targets. Veen et al. (2020) and Vignola et al. (2023) showed that platform companies use gamified rating systems and variable pricing to steer couriers' behavior, encouraging them to accept more jobs, be more efficient, and work longer hours. The gamification of gig work, however, as Lata et al. (2023) found, enables exploitative practices and drives increased work pressure on platform workers. Similarly, Daniels (2024) noted that in Southeast Asia, food delivery couriers report feeling compelled to drive faster and take risks to meet strict delivery timelines imposed by platforms' gamified systems. These studies demonstrate how the algorithmic designs of various platforms aid the mediation of labor processes in ways that intensify work, drive workers into unsafe conditions, and allow platforms to evade accountability (Nguyen-Thu and Munn, 2024). They also reveal a paradox at the heart of gig work: workers may appreciate the freedom to set their own schedules, but in practice that freedom is hemmed in by performance metrics and algorithmic surveillance.

Discussions regarding the precariousness of gig work has been an important strand in the literature for much of the last decade. Talamayan's (2022) study of Foodpanda in the Philippines reported that sudden shifts in payment schemes (e.g., from hourly pay to perdelivery rates) promote precarity, cutting riders' average earnings dramatically. Teerakowitkajorn's (2020) investigation of on-demand food delivery apps in Thailand noted that ride-hailing and delivery workers are typically paid per ride or delivery, with no guaranteed minimum earnings. This precarious arrangement, as Dong et al. (2025) pointed out, creates not only economic but also psychological strain, with drivers facing stress, anxiety, and burnout as they chase algorithmic targets. It is for these reasons that Daniels (2024) underscored the need to address the gap between the safety measures platforms publicly claim to implement under algorithmic management and the actual support and protections couriers experience, advocating for worker-first approaches to occupational safety. It is within this discourse that the study positions its analysis of platform labor, arguing that while platform-mediated work may, in some cases, offer short-term income predictability (especially when compared with other informal work), platforms do not eliminate precarity so much as reconstitute it in new yet familiar forms.

It must also be noted that in many cities in Southeast Asia, Motorcycle-taxi services and informal delivery work were well established long before digital platforms emerged. Faik et al. (2026) identified three mechanisms through which platforms transformed and digitized existing informal networks of motorcycle drivers: first, they codified market interactions through algorithmic pricing and GPS tracking; second, they standardized work practices using performance metrics and bonuses; and third, they extended control by requiring mandatory digital identities and deploying data-driven governance.

Other scholars have also highlighted the practice of everyday agency and collective mobilization. For instance, NguyenThu and Munn (2024) discussed how drivers and riders assert control over their work without disrupting platform's systemic inequalities by cherry-picking higher paying orders, working for multiple apps, or sharing tips in online forums about gaming the algorithm. They refer to this pragmatic middle ground as "platform realism"—a mindset that embraces the platform's demands while resisting exploitation through tactical maneuvers. Meanwhile, Karanović et al. (2021)

analyzed Uber drivers' responses across major U.S. cities, showing how differing regulatory environments shape workers' resistance, adaptation, or compliance, and in turn influence platform-regulator power dynamics. Umney et al. (2024) examined labor unrest cases on every continent and identified two main types of platform worker protests: those seeking better regulations, usually led by established unions using legal approaches, and those demanding fairer compensation and conditions, typically organized by grassroots groups through strikes and demonstrations.

From this brief review of relevant studies, it can be argued that there remains a gap in the study of platform exploitation, particularly in research focused on comparing cases in Southeast Asia. Another underexplored yet critical area of analysis is the intersection of platform capitalism with local labor markets and regulatory regimes. Also, few works have integrated governmentality with neoliberal exploitation frameworks in the context of gig work. This preliminary study attempts to address these gaps in the subsequent sections.

III. Platform capitalism and neoliberal governmentality

One of the core concepts this study unpacks is platform capitalism, a system differentiated from traditional capitalism, which promotes labor competition through algorithmic control, evaluative mechanisms, and geographically conditioned commodification to regulate and exploit workers (Howson et al., 2022; Marčeta, 2021; Pasquale, 2016; Straughan and Bissell, 2022; van Doorn and Badger, 2020). The study particularly adopts Srnicek's (2017) definition of platform capitalism as a business model predicated on data extraction, network effects, and proprietary governance. Unlike traditional firms that directly produce goods or offer services, platform companies reap profits by positioning themselves as intermediaries in multi-sided markets (Montero, 2019), allowing companies to engage various actors in digital spaces while reducing labor costs (Uchiyama et al., 2024). As Tan and Gong (2024) put it, by acting as intermediaries linking labor supply and demand, platforms can "extract economic value from both ends."

Southeast Asia is one of the regions where platform capitalism has most visibly produced "superapps" and "mega-platforms" (Zhang and Yuan, 2025). Superapps, like Grab and Gojek, integrate ride-hailing, food delivery, logistics, payments and credit into a single ecosystem. Zhang and Yuan (2025) contend that Asian platforms, viewed through a regional lens, function more as mechanisms for digitizing pre-existing informal economies than as engines of industrial innovation. Their concept of platformization as absorption is especially useful in the analysis here, as they emphasize how delivery and mobility apps bring informal labor into formal digital structures while deepening precarity and state-platform entanglements. Qadri (2021) adds another dimension, arguing that platform workers are what make global technologies function on the ground. By drawing on local knowledge and social networks, they bridge global platforms and local contexts, blurring the line between formal and informal economies and between digital and physical spaces (Qadri, 2021; see Soriano, 2021 for a related discussion on platforms brokering labor). Taken together, these frameworks position platform capitalism in the region as neither a top-down imposition nor a neutral technological solution, but as a contested process shaped by the interplay between platform governance, local labor conditions, and worker agency.

Platform companies often operate outside traditional legal classifications, exploiting ambiguities to avoid labor laws and shift risks to workers (Uchiyama et al., 2024). Framing couriers as "partners" enables them to circumvent obligations for minimum wage, health benefits, insurance, job security, and the right to unionize (Tan and Gong, 2024). Altenried (2024) argues that by positioning themselves as mere intermediaries rather than employers, platforms normalize and legitimize a system in which profits flow upward while social and economic risks fall on gig workers. This leaves gig workers doubly vulnerable within the system, as Roy-Mukherjee and Harrison (2020) argue that their precarious position stems not only from inadequate legal protections but also from their limited understanding of their own rights.

Another theme this study explores is the practice of neoliberal governmentality. It argues that the platformization of labor obscures the notion of work as platforms endorse a certain conduct of "governed" gig workers. In this context, platform companies and neoliberal state policies cultivate an environment where workers are induced to treat themselves as actors responsible for their own welfare, even as platforms exert significant control over their work conditions. This arrangement exemplifies what in Foucauldian discourse has been described as the "entrepreneurial self"—a subject who governs themselves according to market rationalities (Rose, 1996). With platforms promoting individualized responsibility, workers are disproportionately exposed to the risks of oversupply and algorithmic pricing.

Equally important to the analysis presented in this study is an understanding of how drivers come to internalize metrics and ratings that platforms use to evaluate them. As McDaid et al. (2023) demonstrate in their study of Uber drivers in Australia and France, platform algorithms exercise control from a distance, shaping worker behavior without the need for direct supervision. Workers respond in varied ways, developing "individual strategies of endurance," finding ways to work around the system, or leaving the platform altogether, all of which reflect a process of adapting the self to meet platform demands (McDaid et al., 2023). In Southeast Asia, rating systems and real-time dashboards operate in much the same way, nudging drivers to continuously adjust their behavior to meet platform benchmarks, while bearing the financial burden of vehicle wear and unpredictable demand on their own.

The algorithmically endorsed exercise of neoliberal governmentality becomes especially visible when gig riders struggle to maintain clear boundaries between work and rest. Digital surveillance and the internalization of a regime, in which self-discipline is integral, contribute to this condition. Delivery and ride-hailing apps continuously monitor riders' location, response time, acceptance rates, and performance (via customer ratings), suggesting a form of governance over labor. Because pay is calculated only for active deliveries and rides, riders are encouraged to remain logged in and geographically poised to receive requests. Abreu Plasencia et al. (2022), in their report about the working conditions of gig riders in New York City, underscore that some riders endure twelve-hour shifts daily simply to maintain ranking scores.

Within the logic of platform capitalism, the occupational health and safety risks in app-mediated delivery and ride-hailing work are symptomatic of a system that commodifies time, speed, and visibility. Gig riders operate under algorithmic imperatives that prioritize efficiency and customer satisfaction over worker welfare, compelling them to navigate dense urban traffic, inclement weather, and punishing schedules. When faster completions and higher ratings determine whether workers can make ends meet, risk-taking becomes an intrinsic feature of the job rather than a matter of personal choice. Across Asia-Pacific, these pressures have resulted in numerous cases of riders being seriously injured or killed (see Baharudin, 2025; Feng, 2023; Yun and Yeung, 2024;). Despite the dangers, most gig riders remain precariously protected, covered only by minimal or optional insurance schemes.

Although the discussed issues are linked to platform algorithms, it must be noted their operation follows the parameters set by humans who designed various automation processes (Baiocco et al., 2022). Behind every algorithm that powers modern technologies lie a human or corporate actor whose personal biases and interests shape its design and operation (Benjamin, 2019a; 2019b; Seaver, 2017; Hlongwa and Talamayan, 2023). Thus, criticisms leveled at algorithms and platforms in this study are, fundamentally, criticisms of the human judgments and biases that shaped their design and implementation.

These insights reveal how platform capitalism operates as both an accumulation regime and a mode of governance. By fusing neoliberal rationalities with algorithmic technologies, platforms extend market logic into the rhythms of workers' daily lives, producing subjects who are compelled to self-discipline, self-monitor, and self-exploit in pursuit of algorithmically defined success. While delivery and mobility platforms provide conveniences to customers, they have normalized a regime of work without security, with gig workers constantly exposed to income volatility, long work hours, high health risks, and the threat of deactivation or pay reduction. These conditions have gradually given rise to discontent and collective action among delivery riders, which the study explores in the subsequent sections.

IV. Working conditions and labor experiences across Southeast Asia

High motorcycle ownership, widespread smartphone use, and scarce formal employment opportunities have made platform-based gig work a practical option for many Southeast Asians. In Indonesia alone, there are around 125 million registered motorcycles, and nearly three quarters of urban residents have mobile phone access (Royono et al., 2025). The ease of signing up, combined with the widespread adoption of digital wallets, make it relatively straightforward for individuals to immediately earn once they decide to engage in platform-based work (Royono et al., 2025). Recent surveys offer further insights into why workers turn to these platforms: 59 percent of Filipino gig workers take on platform work to supplement their earnings, and 47 percent value control over their working hours (Ipsos, 2025), while in Malaysia, 70 percent turn to gig work for extra income and 60 percent for flexible hours (MyDIGITAL and Ipsos Malaysia, 2024). Among Indonesian gig workers, half cite flexible scheduling as their primary motivation for taking on platform work, while 38 percent do so to supplement their income (Royono et al., 2025). Riders in Thailand and Vietnam report similar motivations, a practical fit for platform work especially in cities where congested streets favor motorcycles over cars (McCarthy, 2023). To further understand these dynamics, this section unpacks the conditions that shape gig workers' experiences. In particular, it pays closer attention to four interrelated dimensions that define platform-based work: wage structures, algorithmically organized work, risk and cost shifting, and (the absence of) social protection.

1. Wage structures

Despite the appearance of steady work, delivery and ride-hailing workers' earnings frequently fall below statutory minimum wages once working hours and out-of-pocket costs are factored in (apart from being unstable). The situation is particularly stark in the Philippines, where gig riders commonly earn between PHP 200 and 600 (approximately USD 3.50 to 10.50) for an eight-hour workday on platforms like Foodpanda or Grab, significantly below the 2023 Metro Manila minimum wage of PHP 537 (approximately USD 9.50) and well under the estimated daily family living cost of PHP 1,200 (approximately USD 21.50) (Gomez and Cecille, 2023). The picture is similarly bleak in Indonesia, where platforms typically deduct 20 to 30 percent from each order's value on top of already dropping pay rates (Al Munawar and Rohmah, 2024). Vietnam, meanwhile, illustrates how broader economic conditions can further erode earnings: when domestic gasoline prices rose 13 times and increased by roughly 37 percent in the first half of 2022, fares rose by only about 1,000 to 2,000 VND per trip (approximately USD 0.04 to 0.08), even as platforms continued to deduct 25 to 31 percent of each fare through commissions and fees (Khanh, 2022).

Malaysia and Thailand tell much the same story. In August 2022, p-hailing riders from different platforms in Malaysia joined a food delivery blackout to demand higher pay, more transparent incentive and scheduling systems, and expanded worker benefits (Uchiyama et al., 2024). The riders have raised concerns about declining earnings, with one gig worker capturing the frustration plainly: "Previously, a few hours work from morning to afternoon could get me RM100, now it's tough to even get RM40 for an entire day's work" (Yeong, 2022). Amid social distancing measures and dine-in closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand saw a marked increase in reliance on food delivery apps, with customer orders rising by 100–300 percent and restaurant registrations tripling (Sirikeratikul, 2020). For many Thai workers, especially in Bangkok and tourist centers, delivery gigs became a fallback source of income (Open Development Thailand, 2021). In August 2021, Foodpanda's decision to reduce per-delivery payments by at least 30 percent, lowering fees to THB 21, prompted more than 100 riders in Thailand to mobilize in opposition (Li, 2021). Foodpanda riders called for the reinstatement of the previous pay structure and greater transparency regarding the company's compensation adjustments (Li, 2021).

Platform work, as these cases show, does not so much improve on informal employment as reorganize its terms. Workers may earn more than in some casual informal jobs, but this is contingent on absorbing excessive working hours, covering their own operational costs, and tolerating commission structures that systematically redirect earnings toward platforms. The appearance of higher income thus obscures the transfer of financial risk onto workers, leaving many unable to meet basic living costs despite working full-time (and even extended) hours.

2. Algorithmic control and work organization

Algorithmic management shapes nearly every aspect of platform workers' daily experience, from the orders they receive to the pay they earn and their continued access to work. In Vietnam, daily earnings have become increasingly dependent on performance-based incentive schemes tied to ride counts and point thresholds, compelling workers to maximize trips rather than exercise genuine autonomy over their schedules. Because short-distance rides often produce little net income after platform deductions, many drivers have sought to circumvent algorithmic pricing altogether by negotiating fares directly with passengers, particularly around transport hubs and hospitals (Khanh, 2022).

The opacity of algorithmic systems is a recurring source of grievance. Malaysian riders, for instance, have criticized inaccurate distance calculations used to determine pay, with navigation apps showing distances that differ from those recorded by platforms, directly affecting their earnings. One rider, in describing the experience, expressed, "Our navigation apps show 15km, but theirs might show 12km. Sometimes their map shows a shortcut route, but in reality, the shortcut is not usable" (Yeong, 2022). The same rider, pointing out the sense of powerlessness the system produces, added, "The situation now is like masters and servants. We are chained to these corporations by the fact that we have to purchase their carrier bags and earn according to their systems" (Yeong, 2022).

Algorithmic systems also exercise control through deactivation, a mechanism that workers have little power to contest. In the Philippines, Foodpanda imposed 10-year suspensions on at least 30 couriers, a decision later attributed to a system error, which triggered a large offline demonstration involving hundreds of riders (Mendoza, 2021). When 70 more riders were suspended for joining the protest, the punitive reach of platform governance became unmistakably clear (Mendoza, 2021). Workers across the region describe sudden and drastic changes in payment structures or wrongful deactivations as unjust, yet the black-boxed nature of algorithmic decision-making makes these outcomes difficult to contest through any formal channel.

3. Risk and cost shifting

A defining feature of platform work across Southeast Asia is the systematic transfer of financial, physical, and occupational risks from platforms onto workers. Rather than absorbing the costs of doing business, platforms structure their operations so that workers bear the burden of fuel, mobile data, motorcycle maintenance, and loan repayments, expenses that significantly erode take-home earnings (Fairwork, 2023). The costs workers absorb are not only financial. Indonesian drivers confront serious health hazards associated with sustained app-based transport work, including lung and respiratory diseases, haemorrhoids, back pain, and exhaustion-related illnesses that compound over time (Panimbang, 2021). In Thailand, the entry of new delivery platforms has prompted companies to compete through minimal accident insurance schemes, leaving riders to juggle multiple apps just to maintain basic coverage. These risks are not incidental but are structurally embedded in how platforms organize work, with algorithmic pressure to complete deliveries quickly and maintain high ratings pushing workers to take risks they would not otherwise accept.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino riders frequently fell victim to delivery scams and hoax orders, with malicious actors placing cash-on-delivery orders and then disappearing, leaving riders responsible for unpaid merchandise. Such fake bookings became so widespread that in early 2022 the Philippine Senate unanimously approved a bill requiring companies to cover the cost of any fraudulent transaction, a rare instance of regulatory intervention on behalf of workers.

The Malaysian case further illustrates how risk shifting is embedded in the very structure of neoliberal platform governance. Platforms such as Grab classify riders as self-employed, shifting responsibility for social security coverage under the Social Security Organization (SOCSO or PERKESO) onto workers themselves (Amin, 2025; Uchiyama et al., 2024). Riders have criticized the lack of effective insurance coverage despite being required to contribute to social security schemes, pointing to a system that demands contributions from workers while offering little in return. As one rider put it: “We must fight for our wages. [Grab] likes to call us ‘Partners,’ but what does this Partnership get us? Nothing” (Yeong, 2022). A consistent logic underpinning platform neoliberalism in the region could be observed: profitability is maintained by pushing the costs, hazards, and uncertainties of work onto those with the least power to resist.

4. Social protection

The absence of adequate social protection is one of the most consequential features of platform work in Southeast Asia, leaving workers without meaningful recourse when faced with injury, illness, income loss, or wrongful deactivation. As mentioned, in Malaysia, platforms such as Grab classify riders as self-employed, and this classification strips workers of the right to unionize, limiting their access to formal collective bargaining mechanisms (Tan and Gong, 2024). Riders have expressed frustration at being required to contribute to social security schemes that offer them little protection in reality.

The Philippine case reinforces this picture. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, delivery and ride-hailing workers were widely celebrated as essential frontliners, yet platform companies generally did not provide hazard pay, health insurance, or paid leave (Gomez and Cecille, 2023). The gap between public recognition and actual protection could not have been more pronounced; in July 2021, Foodpanda riders in Davao City, through a letter the president of the Davao United Delivery Riders Association submitted to the city government, appealed:

> "*Taliwala sa pandemya, kakapoy, ulan ug init naningkamot kami aron manginabuhi ug mahatagan og maayong kinabuhi ang among pamilya apan ubos ug walay igong basehan ang* computation *sa among* 'earnings' *o kita nga ginahatag sa* Food Panda [sic] *sa amo* (Amid the pandemic, exhaustion, rain, and heat, we are working hard to support our family despite the low and baseless way Foodpanda is computing our earnings)." (Llemit, 2021)

Legislative responses have been partial at best. Despite the Philippine Senate's unanimous approval of a bill requiring companies to cover the cost of fraudulent cash-on-delivery transactions, comprehensive social protection frameworks for gig workers remain underdeveloped.

In Vietnam, platform workers lack social insurance and long-term security, yet many displaced workers have accepted these conditions as a trade-off for the autonomy and flexibility that platform work appears to offer (An, 2022). As a former factory worker told *VN Express International*, "I am my own boss and no one can tell me what to do. Not to mention that my new job allows me to spend more time with my family" (An, 2022). This acceptance, however, reflects the absence of viable alternatives rather than genuine satisfaction with working conditions. With formal employment increasingly out of reach for many across the region, platform work becomes the most accessible option available, regardless of whether workers would choose it under better circumstances, and the absence of social protection becomes a condition workers learn to manage rather than one they are able to contest.

In sum, for gig riders in Southeast Asia, daily work means navigating urban hazards and time pressures for uncertain earnings under the watch of an algorithm that can terminate their access to work without warning. Many accept this bargain out of necessity; platform work is a readily accessible job in economies that may not provide sufficient formal employment for young populations. Yet, as the discussed labor experiences underline, there is a growing awareness among workers of the structural injustices they face and a determination to seek better terms. The discussion that follows draws these cases together to systematically compare how gig workers across Southeast Asia organize, mobilize, and contest neoliberal platform governance under shared conditions of precarity.

V. Resistance and collective action among gig riders

As mentioned, large informal sectors have long characterized many economies in the region; jobs without fixed contracts or legal protection were already common before the advent of apps. In that sense, platform gig work in Southeast Asia may not be as stark a departure from the norm as it is in societies with stronger welfare states. The concept of having to hustle day-to-day for income, from driving a motorcycle taxi to selling food on the street, was already part of urban life. Platforms essentially digitized and scaled up the informal sector. This can cut both ways. On the one hand, precarious work does not necessarily trigger immediate regulatory intervention because it is a familiar feature of the labor landscape; on the other hand, platform workers may mobilize more readily by adapting informal organizing practices long used in other sectors, including manufacturing (e.g., the case of Vietnam platform workers).

Delivery riders and other gig workers in Southeast Asia have increasingly engaged in acts of resistance and collective organizing. This represents a direct challenge to the narrative of gig work as individualized entrepreneurship. By coming together in protests, strikes, and emergent unions, platform couriers are asserting that they are not isolated freelancers but workers facing common issues. This section surveys the landscape of labor activism among gig riders and examines key strategies of protest, as well as efforts to secure legal recognition and rights.

1. App blackouts

A key protest strategy among gig workers has involved coordinated app switch-offs to disrupt platform operations. Since gig workers lack a workplace in the conventional sense to picket, their leverage comes from collectively withdrawing their labor, in this case by going offline on the app so that the platform's service is disrupted. The study has noted instances of this in Malaysia (food delivery blackouts) and Vietnam (*đồng loạt tắt app*). These strikes are often organized through informal networks and social media. They tend to arise when a particular grievance hits a tipping point, such as a drastic pay cut or a new policy seen as unjust. For example, the August 2022 Malaysia strike was catalyzed by Grab's announcement of lowering base pay (Uchiyama et al., 2024), while in Vietnam, gig riders have resorted to switching off their apps due to low incomes and delivery platforms' large commissions.

These actions demonstrate that gig workers exercise collective power by leveraging the very technologies at the heart of platform capitalism to coordinate a mass response. However, collective action through the described tactic was challenging to sustain. First, not all workers are willing to strike. Teerakowitkajorn (2022) noted that some gig riders fear losing even a day's income, others doubt the efficacy, and many worry about deactivation of their accounts. Platforms have at times responded to worker mobilization by monitoring protest activity and imposing penalties on organizers and participants. The Foodpanda suspensions in the Philippines following the Davao protest illustrate this pattern. Second, the decentralized nature of these movements, while a strength for spontaneity, is a weakness for continuity. As Tan and Gong (2024) explained, differences in priorities and lack of formal leadership make it hard to sustain momentum or negotiate with platform companies.

2. Self-organizing and unions

In parallel with protests, there have been attempts to build more lasting organizations of gig workers. These range from community associations to full-fledged unions or cooperatives. In Indonesia, numerous driver associations, often city-based or even neighborhood-based, have banded together to form alliances and federations that can dialogue with the government. An example of an informal gig worker association is Indonesia's Gabungan Aksi Roda Dua Indonesia (GARDA). In Malaysia, the law forbids non-employees to unionize, so riders have used creative alternatives, such as incorporating as a society or association that can represent their interests (see Cheong, 2023). The group Persatuan Kebajikan E-Hailing Malaysia (PKEH) emerged to voice riders' concerns to platform companies or the Minister of

Human Resources and advocate for better income and welfare policies.

The Philippines stands out as a country where a bona fide platform workers' union has formed. The United Delivery Riders of the Philippines – Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa (RIDERS-SENTRO), launched in 2022, has active chapters in major cities in the country and has pursued both advocacy and legal action. Their focus has been on achieving worker recognition for riders, which would entitle them to minimum wage, bargaining rights, and other benefits. These efforts came amid declining rider compensation, including a 2021 base-fee reduction from PHP 55 (approximately USD 1.10) to PHP 25 (approximately USD 0.50) (Virador, 2024a). The Central Visayas National Labor Relations Commission ruling in 2024, declaring Foodpanda riders as employees, was a huge victory for this approach (Virador, 2024b). The union has since called on Foodpanda to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement, marking an important moment in the regional gig economy where formal engagement between platform companies and riders' unions remains relatively uncommon. Foodpanda's refusal and ongoing legal challenge of the ruling show the difficulties ahead (see Virador, 2024b), but the case has set a precedent that unions can seize upon.

3. Strikes, rallies, and motorcades

During the COVID-19 pandemic, food delivery and ride-hailing gig workers in Southeast Asia increasingly took to the streets to protest wage cuts, high commissions, and lack of protections. Gig drivers across the region organized strikes, rallies, and motorcades—often in their distinctive platform uniforms—to demand fairer treatment. Indonesia saw a sharp rise in gig worker collective action during the pandemic. Between March and December 2020, at least 24 protests by app-based drivers took place across 16 cities, involving around 22,000 drivers for Gojek, Grab, and Maxim (Novianto, 2022). Most early protests were worker-led and demanded the reinstatement of pre-pandemic incentive schemes as drivers' incomes plummeted. The trend continued into 2021, with 28 protests recorded that year, involving 45,000 gig riders, 19 of those actions' key demand was the implementation of higher base fares (Novianto, 2022).

In the Philippines, app-based delivery riders also staged public demonstrations during the COVID-19 pandemic, spurred by sudden pay cuts and unfair labor practices. Apart from the July 2021 protest in Davao, collective action by food delivery riders in the Philippines continued to take visible and organized forms in subsequent years. In November 2022, GrabFood delivery drivers in Cebu City held a public "Unity Ride and Protest" protest to oppose a reduction in their pay and incentives (Palaubsanon, 2022). Spearheaded by United Delivery Riders of the Philippines (RIDERS) and Kapatiran ng Dalawang Gulong (KAGULONG), gig riders rode in convoy through the city, demanding that Grab rescind pay cuts.

Thailand's food delivery and ride-hailing workers also engaged in several street protests during the COVID-19 pandemic. A prominent early protest came in March 2021 in Bangkok, where hundreds of motorcycle delivery riders for the app Line Man rallied outside the company's office. They demanded the company reinstate the THB 62 rate (approximately USD 1.90) and open a dialogue on rider contracts (Leesa-nguansuk, 2021). However, no immediate reversal came; the company defended the pay cut as necessary, fueling further discontent (Just Economy and Labor Institute, 2023). Meanwhile, in Vietnam, hundreds of GrabBike riders in Hanoi went on strike and swarmed Grab's office in Cau Giay District in December 2020 (Nguyen and Tu, 2020). The trigger was a new government tax regulation, which imposed a 10 percent value-added tax (VAT) on ride-hailing trips, which Grab decided to pass on to drivers by raising its commission rate from 20 to 27.27 percent

Table 1 Key concerns and gig worker responses by country.

Country	Key concerns / conditions	Collective actions
Indonesia	• Dropping pay rates: Driver incomes fell by up to 70 percent during the pandemic. • High platform commissions: Companies take 20–30 percent of order value, reducing net pay. • Lack of insurance and health risks • Unclear incentive schemes: Frequent changes in bonuses and point systems cause uncertainty.	• Early pandemic protests (March–Dec 2020): At least 24 demonstrations across 16 cities demanded the reinstatement of prepandemic incentives. • Continued protests in 2021: Around 28 protests involving 45,000 drivers pressed for higher base fares. • Extreme protest action: In July 2022 some drivers sewed their lips shut outside government offices to draw attention to low pay (see Timmerman, 2022). • Mutualaid and mobilization via WhatsApp groups: Drivers used messaging apps to coordinate assistance and organize protests.
Malaysia	• Declining earnings and inaccurate pay: Riders complain that distance calculations used to compute pay are incorrect, and earnings have dropped sharply. • Selfemployment status: Platforms classify riders as selfemployed, leaving them responsible for social security contributions and without the right to unionize. • Lack of transparency: Platforms provide little clarity on incentive schemes and scheduling. • Limited insurance coverage: Even though riders contribute to social security, effective coverage is minimal.	• National app switchoff (August 2022): Riders across multiple platforms collectively went offline, demanding higher pay, transparent incentive systems, and better benefits. • Press conferences and public statements: Riders highlighted inaccurate distance calculations and compared their situation to “masters and servants.” • Association organizing: The Persatuan Kebajikan EHailing Malaysia (PKEH) represents rider interests and lobbies for policy change.
Philippines	• Low earnings relative to costs: Riders typically earn PHP 200–600 for an eighthour workday (≈USD 3.50–10.50), far below the Metro Manila minimum wage. • High operating expenses: Fuel, mobile data, motorcycle maintenance, and loan repayments eat into earnings.	• Letter to local government (July 2021, Davao City): Riders appealed to city officials about unfair earnings calculations. • Mass street protest (July 2021, Davao City): Hundreds of Foodpanda riders protested after dozens were suspended for participating in collective action.

Table 1 (continued)

Country	Key concerns / conditions	Collective actions
	• Lack of benefits: Riders generally have no hazard pay, health insurance, or paid leave.	• Unity Ride and Protest (November 2022, Cebu City): RIDERSSENTRO and KAGULONG organized a convoy to oppose pay cuts and reduced incentives. • Unionization: The United Delivery Riders of the Philippines (RIDERSSENTRO) formed in 2022 to pursue legal recognition and minimumwage rights.
Thailand	• Pay reductions: Perdelivery payments were cut by at least 30 percent. • High competition and platform dominance: Pandemicdriven growth led to more riders but intensified competition, depressing earnings. • Fragmented workforce: Many riders view gig work as a fallback income source; collective action is often sporadic. • Limited willingness to strike: Surveys show roughly half of Thai riders do not favor protests.	• Bangkok rally (March 2021): Hundreds of Line Man riders protested outside company offices, demanding the reinstatement of higher rates. • Localized strikes: Temporary refusals to accept jobs in Nakhon Si Thammarat and other cities targeted pay cuts and bonus reductions (see Leesa-nguansuk, 2021). • Online networking: Riders formed Facebook groups to share tips, warnings, and fundraising appeals, though sustained collective action remains limited.
Vietnam	• Low fares and high commissions: Platforms deduct 25–31 percent of each fare while raising ride prices only minimally. • Informal labor surge: Job losses pushed more than 20 million workers into informal or platform work (see Nguyen, 2025), many attracted by perceived autonomy but lacking social protection. • Performancebased incentives: Earnings depend heavily on meeting high ride counts and point thresholds.	• GrabBike strike and rally (December 2020, Hanoi): Hundreds of riders protested a taxdriven commission increase that raised platform fees from 20 to 27.27 percent. • App switchoffs and collective logouts: Riders coordinated to go offline (đồng loạt tắt app) to demand adjustments to pricing and commission structures. • Informal organizing via social media: Groups formed to coordinate protests and share information about platform changes.

(Rayda et al., 2025).

Overall, delivery and ride-hailing workers showed remarkable initiative in organizing in-person protests during the COVID-19 pandemic. These ranged from strikes and convoy rallies to formal union-led demonstrations. The common thread was grievances over reduced earnings and lack of safety nets at a time when gig workers were hailed as essential yet treated as expendable. In many cases the protests yielded at least partial gains, whether pay adjustments, dialogues with officials, or increased public awareness, and laid the groundwork for nascent collective representation among gig workers. The pandemic thus became a catalyst for gig labor activism in Southeast Asia, bringing platform worker issues from the digital shadows to the streets.

VI. Conclusion

In a region with persistently high unemployment and widespread informality, platform-based delivery and mobility services appeared to offer a lifeline to people seeking income, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. As this study has shown, however, the labor regimes created by platform companies simply reorganized informal work. While platforms digitized informal work and connected riders to wider customer bases, the financial rewards went mostly to platform companies as workers were left to shoulder the risks and costs. The neoliberal discourse of entrepreneurship promoted by these platforms—advertising gig work as a chance to "be your own boss" with flexible hours—has been powerful in the region. Yet, workers' lived experiences tell a different story, one of declining earnings and limited recourse against platform decisions. The neoliberal framing of the gig worker as an autonomous entrepreneur sits uneasily alongside the reality of riders navigating dangerous urban streets under constant algorithmic surveillance for uncertain pay.

The political economy of delivery and mobility platforms in Southeast Asia, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reveals a contradictory trajectory. On the one hand, these platforms have become deeply embedded in the region's urban economies and daily life. On the other hand, they have entrenched a model of work that is often deleterious for workers, structured around "neoliberal logics of labor flexibility and casualization" (Wolfson, 2020). This analysis also pointed to the coercive role of algorithmic management. The evidence from the region suggests that drivers and couriers become dependent on platforms for access to tasks and wages while having little influence over pricing or work conditions. The absence of strong social protection, collective bargaining, and minimum-wage enforcement leaves platform workers exposed to the full force of algorithmic control and market volatility.

Gig riders have not been passive in the face of these conditions. Across the region, platform workers have built mutual aid networks and organized protests against platform-imposed precarity, signaling that the current system is being actively contested. The shift from online communities to street demonstrations gestures toward the emergence of a collective identity rooted in shared grievances.

As it was noted earlier, this study is preliminary—a first step toward systematic comparison of country conditions and experiences. Future research would benefit from sustained fieldwork and worker surveys conducted across multiple country contexts. Such research should also interrogate what is distinctively Southeast Asian about the patterns documented here. It could examine, for instance, if certain forms of platform contestation prominent elsewhere are less prevalent in this regional setting, or if the region's pervasive informality and the ways states have accommodated or deferred to platform companies give rise to dynamics not yet captured in the existing literature. Tracing these regional particularities would also help ground policy recommendations in the specific realities of Southeast Asia. Also, it is helpful to explore further the implications of platforms' transformation into spaces of rights contestation. One approach would be to examine closely the construction of what Zoppi (2026) describes as "new grammars of solidarity," observing that solidarity has not been dissolved by the individualized nature of gig work but forged out of the shared experience of precarity. The underrepresentation of women in delivery and ride-hailing work across the region also warrants future attention, particularly the factors that shape this phenomenon and how gender more broadly mediates entry into and experience of platform work.

From a regional perspective, the Southeast Asian delivery and mobility sector illustrates how global platform capitalism is contested and reshaped by local labor conditions and regulatory gaps. The region's experience cautions against both the optimism of tech-solutionist narratives and the assumption that precarious labor is an inevitable feature of "development." Platforms have created jobs and brought convenience to consumers, but they have done so by recoding long-standing patterns of labor extraction in new technological forms. How those patterns are ultimately challenged will shape not only the future of gig work in Southeast Asia, but also the terms on which platform labor may be justly governed and protected across the Global South.

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