Gig Rights & Gig Wrongs

Initial Findings from the Gig Rights Project: Labour Rights, Co-Determination, Collectivism and Job Quality in the UK Gig Economy

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Contents

Executive Summary

Attempts to investigate working conditions and labour rights in the UK gig economy have been hampered by the hard-to-reach nature of this population. Most existing studies have overcome this difficulty by using a qualitative research design where sample size is less important. When UK quantitative studies have been undertaken they have either been weakened by relatively small and potentially biased samples or undertaken with the support of platform companies with important questions relating to labour rights not being asked.[1] The Gig Rights Project sought to fill this void by generating a novel non-probability sample of gig workers by advertising our survey directly to UK gig workers active on Internet platforms.[2] The result is a unique sample of 510 UK workers that we believe spans the diversity of the gig economy. Our diverse sample allows us to investigate the degree to which a broad range of factors influence work experiences and shape views towards labour rights, including whether the work is undertaken remotely or in local proximity to the customer, workers are migrants or UK-born, male or female, younger or older, or more or less educated.

The data reported below highlights that working in the UK gig economy frequently entails low pay, anxiety and stress. The median respondent in our study earns only £8.97 per hour – a figure below the UK minimum wage at the time of the research (£9.50). In fact, 52% of our respondents were earning below the minimum wage. A major factor contributing to low pay rates is that this work entails spending significant amounts of time waiting or looking for work while logged on to a platform. Not only is the work low paid but it is also extremely insecure and risky. Forty percent of our respondents felt there was a chance that they would lose their ability to make a living on their main platform and become unemployed in the next twelve months. Other types of work-related insecurity were even more prevalent, with a majority feeling anxious regarding their future pay, their influence over how their job is done, their ability to use their skills, unexpected changes to hours, and clients giving them unfair feedback that impacts future income. Additionally, around a quarter of our respondents felt that they were risking their health or safety in doing gig work and, likewise, a quarter experienced pain as a result of their work.

The findings on low pay, anxiety and stress should not be dismissed as the gig economy constituting 'side hustles' of little importance. While it is true that only around a third of our respondents earned 90% or more of their total earnings from the gig economy or worked at least 37.5 hours a week on platforms, its importance to many is evidenced by the median respondent spending 28 hours a week undertaking gig work and this work constituting 60% of their total earnings. In fact, 76% of our respondents reported that platform work provided at least 25% of their total earnings. Once we recognise working conditions in the gig economy to be the serious issue that they are, our findings raise important policy questions regarding how to improve them.

The Gig Rights Project has taken a novel approach to answering these policy questions by asking workers themselves what policy interventions would have the biggest impact on the quality of their working lives.[3] Firstly, nearly all respondents selected at least one of five core employment rights as having the most immediate potential for making a positive difference to their working life. Top priorities were 'the national minimum wage', 'paid holiday time', 'payment whenever logged on to the platform/app and looking for work', 'sick pay', and 'protection against unfair

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[1] Berg and Johnston (2018).

[2] In doing so we followed the example of previous research into both the local gig economy (Griesbach et al., 2019; Milkman et al. 2021) and the remote gig economy Wood et al. (2021).

[3] While we maintain that workers' own perspectives on these questions are important, they are not a perfect source of information – workers may have only a partial understanding of their situation or their views might be influenced by incorrect assumptions or the nefarious influence of other actors. However, our research is an important addition, and potentially corrective, to that which seeks to devise policy suggestions solely upon the interpretations of experts.

dismissal (including platform deactivation)', and, for remote gig workers, 'guaranteed predictable weekly hours'. The demand for these rights suggests a need to separate the need for labour protections from conventional understandings of employment classification. Respondents overwhelmingly believed their work to be best described as self-employment (i.e. working as a freelancer or independent contractor). Whether undertaking remote or local (including Uber) gig work had little influence on this perception. This view may be a reflection of the high levels of flexibility, autonomy, and discretion that our findings demonstrate that these workers experience. However, given that they also experience low pay, insecurity and anxiety, labour protections should clearly not be the preserve of employees. The self-employed who are dependent on platforms for making a living are urgently in need of labour protections that can shield them against the huge power asymmetries that exist in this sector and warrants the expansion of the current 'worker' status to protect them. Our respondents also felt that the creation of co-determination mechanisms that would enable workers and their representatives to influence an enterprise's decision-making would be an immediate benefit to their working lives. In fact, nearly three in four workers saw the introduction of some form of co-determination as having immediate potential for improving their working lives. These policies include elected bodies of worker representatives approving all major platform changes that impact jobs and working conditions. For remote gig workers, another priority was the creation of affordable co-working spaces where they could meet people doing similar work to themselves. Local gig workers in contrast favoured the creation of pay systems that smoothed irregular earnings to provide a similar pay cheque each month.

Our findings clearly highlight the potential for trade union growth in this sector. With majorities being willing to join and even organise trade unions, this support for trade unions was greater than previously found for non-union UK workers generally. However, this support was tempered by ambivalence regarding trade unions' immediate focus and effectiveness in improving working conditions in the gig economy. As a consequence, only a few workers said they would turn to a trade union or other professional body for advice/assistance or guidance related to their working conditions. The employment and co-determination rights highlighted above were seen as more immediate remedies to the ills of the gig economy.

However, local gig economy workers were more likely to be trade union members and to have engaged in related activities than remote gig economy workers. This greater engagement was associated with more positive attitudes towards trade unions. This suggests that worker ambivalence towards the efficacy of trade unions may in part be rooted in the lack of attention that trade unions have provided to these workers in the past. If trade unions were to expand the efforts already underway by unions such as the ADCU, IWGB, and GMB in local gig work, then workers' may become more aware of the potential benefits of unions. We find a strong sense of collectivism among gig workers, with these workers being enthusiastic about ways of working cooperatively and exhibiting aligned left-wing political orientations.

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Introduction

In little over a decade the 'gig economy' has risen from obscurity to become synonymous with the contemporary digitalised labour market. Indeed, one recent survey suggests that approximately 750,000 adults in the UK currently work in the gig economy.[4] Rarely has a form of paid work proved so contentious. Despite initial uncertainty and confusion regarding what the term 'gig economy' meant, over time both policy and academic consensus have coalesced around the view that it refers to the buying and selling of labour via digital platforms. It is the centrality of digital platforms to the gig economy that renders it distinct from traditional forms of freelance, contract, and project-based work.[5] Despite the centrality of labour platforms to the operation of the gig economy there is a great deal of debate regarding how platforms should be understood and what it is that they actually do.[6] Platform companies claim that they simply provide a digital means for entrepreneurs to connect and do business. According to this view, they are just technology providers who enable efficient market matching. Academic research, however, repeatedly highlights that labour platforms do far more than this and in reality entail forms of dependence, control, governance and managerial authority.[7] But a lack of clarity regarding the operation of labour platforms has enabled gig economy companies to operate within a regulatory grey area beyond existing employment rights and labour protections.[8] Employment rights and labour protections were created in recognition of the asymmetrical power relations that exist between employer and employee. This power asymmetry results from employees being in a position of economic dependence on their employer and thus existing in a relationship of ongoing subordination that makes them vulnerable to exploitation. In contrast, by virtue of not being employees (i.e. not existing in a relationship of ongoing subordination), the self-employed are excluded from employment rights, labour protections, and barred from collective bargaining. The self-employed are legally seen as constituting businesses in their own right and, therefore, as entering into service agreements with their customers which are governed by self-enforced contracts (adjudicated by courts if disputes arise).[9]

Much of the policy debate has, therefore, focused on whether labour platforms actually constitute employers, and whether those selling their labour via platforms warrant employment rights. For example, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) has argued that the gig economy involves 'casual and insecure platform work […] and working people don't have the protection they need'[10]. Meanwhile, the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed (IPSE), which claims to have nearly 7,000 gig worker members, has in contrast opposed any extension of employment rights for gig workers, arguing that doing so would 'drive a stake through the heart of the flexibility which makes gig work so attractive to people'.[11] Focusing on employment status is also problematic from a public policy perspective because platforms function in a variety of ways, only some of which overlap with the functions of employers (such as hiring and firing decisions and control over work and pay).[12] As a result attempts to improve working conditions in the gig economy often end up in legal wrangles over whether a particular platform's operations constitute employment. Additionally, as platforms are constantly altering

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[4] Both Uber and Deliveroo began establishing themselves in the UK in 2012 and 2013, respectively. TaskRabbit also launched in the UK in 2013, however, less visible remote gig work was being undertaken in the UK for several years prior to this. Charlton-Czaplicki and Hukal (2022) use the random probability 'Understanding Society Survey' to estimate that 1.4% of adults in the UK currently make a living for the gig economy.

[5] Taylor (2017); Vallas and Schor (2020).

[6] Vallas and Schor (2020).

[7] Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021).

[8] Aloisi (2016); Cherry (2016); De Stefano (2016); Prassl and Risak (2016).

[9] Sisson (2008); Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021).

[10] BBC (2019).

[11] Independent (2018).

[12] Prassl (2018).

their design, they can easily avoid legal rulings by making small changes to how they operate. This is how Uber has managed to evade a UK Supreme Court Ruling that drivers must be paid the minimum wage whenever they are logged into the app and willing to accept passengers.

In this report, we argue that to focus exclusively on employment status is to miss the point. Instead, we take a different approach and ask gig workers directly, irrespective of whether platforms technically constitute their employers or not, what labour protections and forms of representation would make the greatest impact to the quality of their working lives. We then look at working conditions in this sector in order to explain why support for particular policies might exist. If workers themselves strongly believe that particular protections would be beneficial and we can identify the underlying material conditions that such policies could plausibly alleviate, then these are good reasons for supporting them even if it means amending our understanding of who is in need of employment protection. After all, contemporary labour laws and conceptions of employment largely originate from the 1960s, well before the existence of powerful digital platforms. While in the 1960s most economic activity centred around firms and the public sector, today platforms play an increasingly important role as third parties that strategically manage demand and supply, overcome coordination problems, and reduce information and contracting costs.[13] Indeed, it has been estimated that in the United States platforms have come to intermediate 70% of business practices in service industries, accounting for 5.2 million establishments.[14]

Digital platforms are being used in the UK gig economy to enable paid work both locally (Deliveroo, Uber, TaskRabbit, Amazon Flex etc.) and remotely (Upwork, Fiverr etc.).[15] Locally undertaken work requires workers and customers to be physically proximate to each other. This includes: delivering food, packages and messages; driving passengers to locations (often referred to as ride-hailing); cleaning; and handyperson work. In contrast, remote gig work entails work such as data entry, graphic design and writing, which can be delivered remotely over the Internet. As such, remote gig work does not require physical proximity between workers and customers and can span international borders. Whether local or remote, gig work usually entails working alone on the streets, in multiple locations or at home, rendering those undertaking such work a hard-to-reach population for traditional techniques for surveying the working population. Therefore, between March and November 2022, the Gig Rights Project surveyed 510 UK gig economy workers active on Facebook or Upwork. Facebook Ads were used to reach 1.2 million people of whom 15,500 people clicked through to the Gig Rights Project Survey landing page. By doing so we were able to collect data from 257 workers in the local gig economy. The three main platforms being used by workers were Deliveroo, UberEats and Uber. We supplemented this data with data from 253 remote gig workers; randomly selected from the Upwork platform in line with quotas for task and gender derived from the Online Labour Index.[16] The aim was not a representative sample of the UK gig economy but rather a sample of sufficient size and diversity to explore within-population differences. However, many of the findings presented below are not substantively sensitive to worker characteristics, such as age, country of birth, education, or gender. As can be seen in Figure 1. below our local gig workers differed substantially from the remote gig workers[17] in terms of gender, university education, and age,

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[13] Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021).
[14] Kenny et al. (2021).
[15] De Stefano (2016); Huws et al. (2016); Wood et al. (2018).
[16] http://onlinelabourobservatory.org/
[17] 'Our remote and local categories were created by placing all those who selected that they 'performed non-manual tasks (e.g. web and software development, writing and translation, accounting, legal and admin services, marketing and media, audio and visual services, etc.) in the remote category and those who selected all other types of work (driving, delivery and manual tasks) in the local category.

and, therefore, differences in sector will in many cases correspond with differences by these other characteristics, but, for simplicity, we focus on sector-based differences. Moreover, while we make no claims for the representativeness of our sample, we maintain that by focusing on policy preferences that are not substantially sensitive to worker characteristics in our sample we can identify gig economy views and working conditions that are likely to be widely experienced.

**Figure 1. Characteristics of the Gig Rights Project Sample**
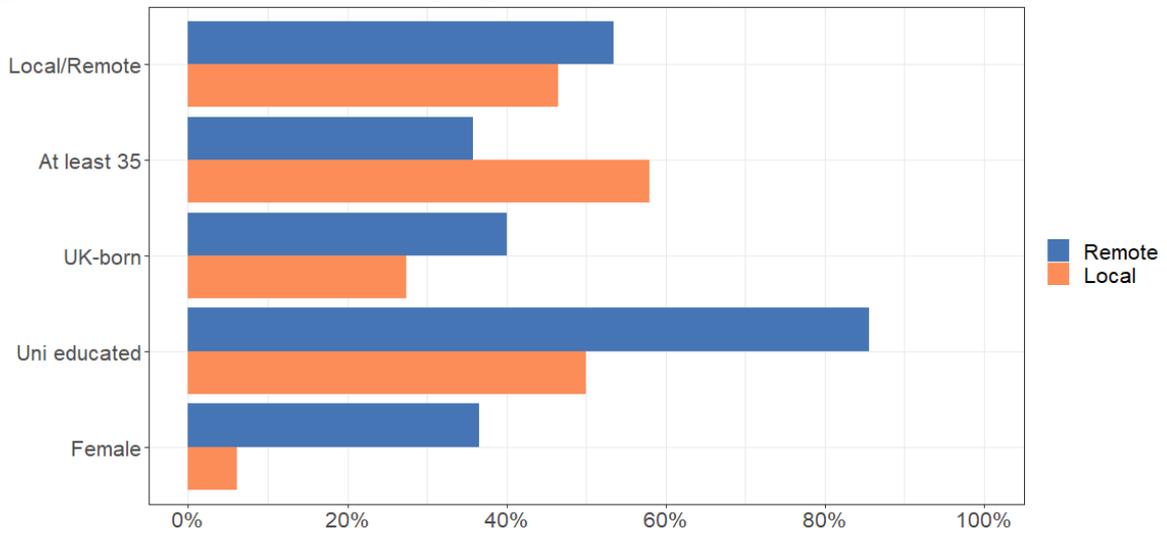
Findings
Employment Status vs. Employment Rights
Employment classification
One of the most contentious issues regarding the gig economy is whether platform companies are falsely classifying platform workers as self-employed. This issue has been repeatedly debated in the law courts, press and academia. Surprisingly, as Figure 2. below demonstrates our findings suggest that this controversy is not shared by gig workers themselves, who widely believe their work to be best described as self-employment (i.e. working as a freelancer or independent contractor). Whether the respondent was undertaking remote or local gig work had little influence. Moreover, that this work is best described as self-employment was even accepted by the majority of Uber drivers despite the recent Supreme Court ruling that their correct employment classification is that of 'workers'.

Figure 2. Thinking about your main platform work, how would you describe your employment status?
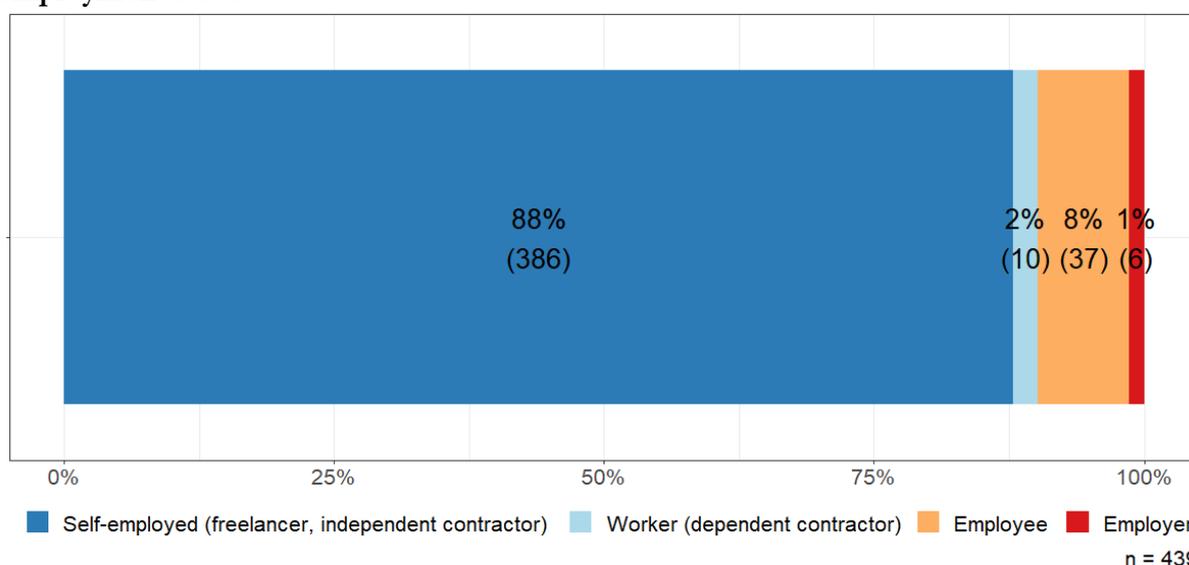

Discretion, autonomy and flexibility
The perception that gig work constitutes self-employment is seemingly partially rooted in a platform labour process that grants workers the autonomy and discretion necessary to feel that they are 'being their own boss.' Indeed, according to the Gig Rights Project Survey, gig work often enables those doing this work to easily take time off to deal with personal or family matters (see Figure 3.) and to decide the time they start and finish work (see Figure 4.). As can be seen in Figure 3, seventy-eight percent of our respondents reported that it was 'not difficult' or 'not too difficult' to arrange to take an hour or two off during working hours to take care of personal or family matters. Additionally, 82% agreed or strongly agreed that they could decide the time they start and finish work (see Figure 4 and Figure 5.). Our respondents also frequently reported experiencing discretion over what tasks they do (78%) and having influence over how they do them (79%) (see Figures 6 & 7). In fact, comparing the Gig Rights Project survey to the 2017 Skills and Employment Survey[18] suggests that compared to workers utilising similar skills both, local and remote gig workers experience greater autonomy.[19]

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[18] Gallie et al. (2018).

[19] Remote gig work tends to involve more specialised skills (such as translation and software programming) and can be compared to workers with intermediate skills in the Skills and Employment Survey, while local gig work involves

Figure 3. Would you say that for you arranging to take an hour or two off during working hours to take care of personal or family matters is…

n = 445
NB Local/Remote counts exclude 12 cases of 'Both'
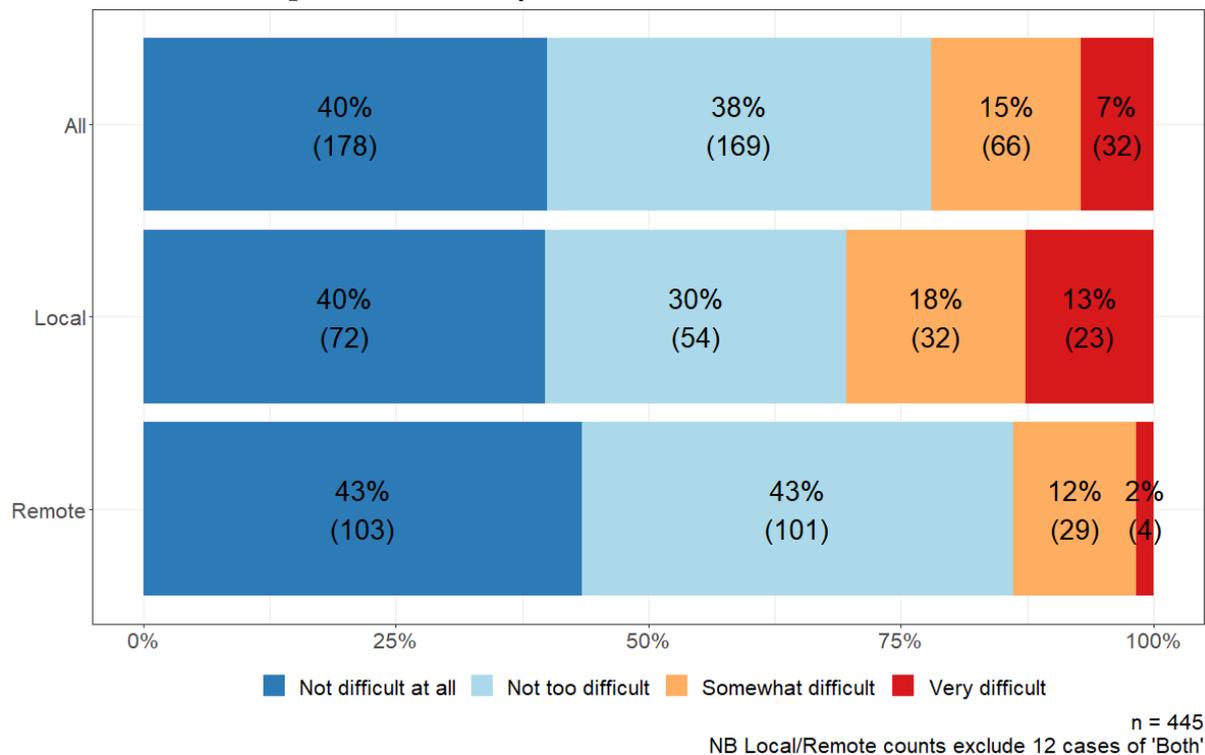
Figure 4. How much do you agree or disagree with the statement "I can decide the time I start and finish work"?

n = 454
NB Local/Remote counts exclude 12 cases of 'Both'
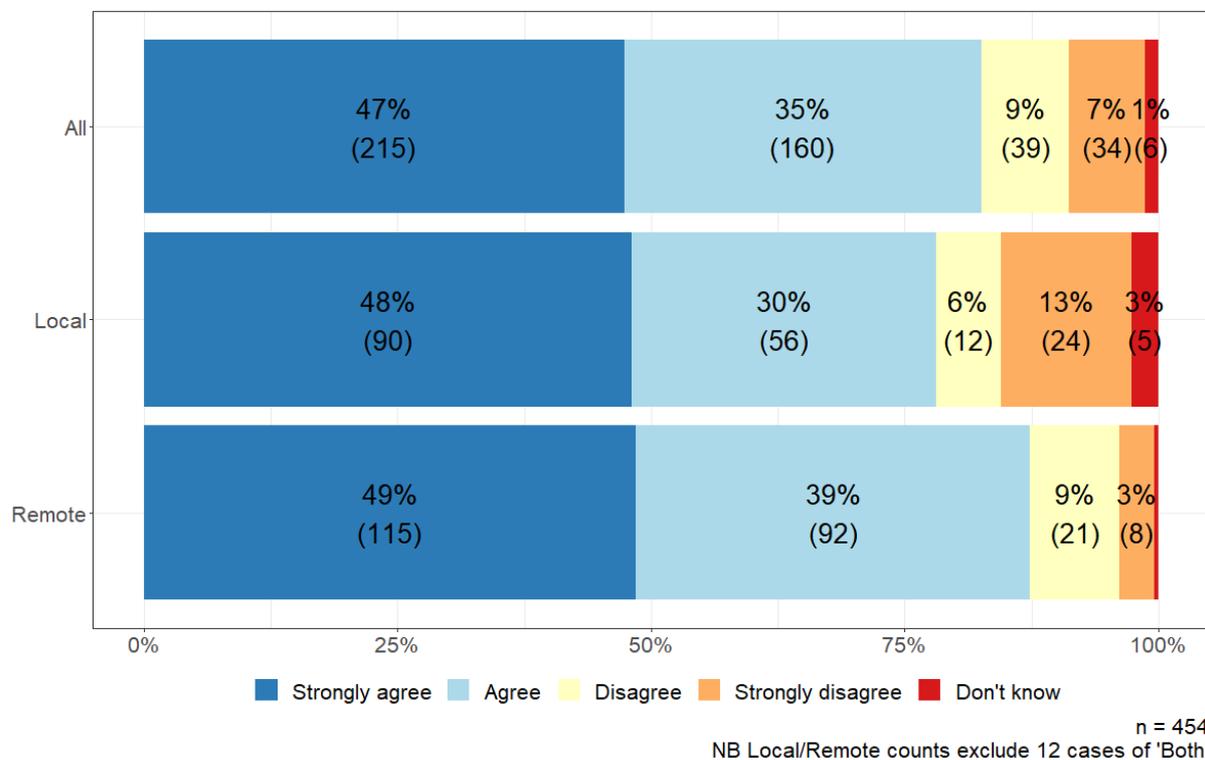
more general skills, such as driving, cycling and customer service, and thus can be compared to skilled routine workers.

Figure 5. How much do you agree or disagree with the statement "I can decide the time I start and be reasonably confident of having work to undertake"?
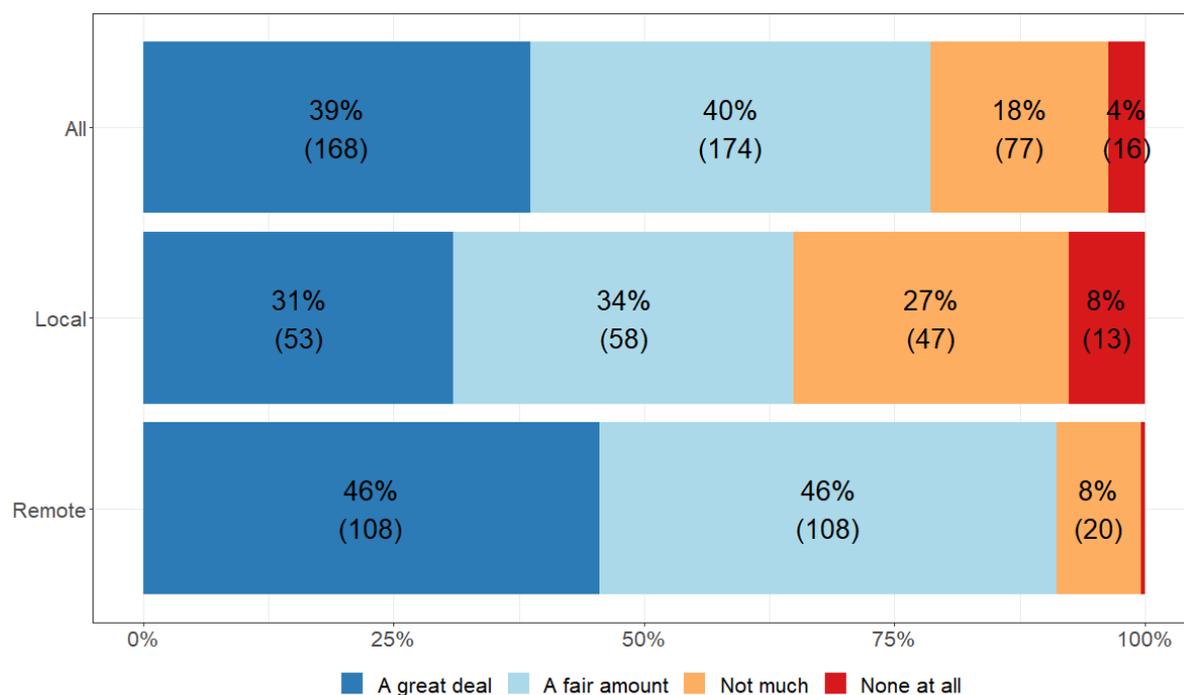

n = 454
NB Local/Remote counts exclude 12 cases of 'Both'
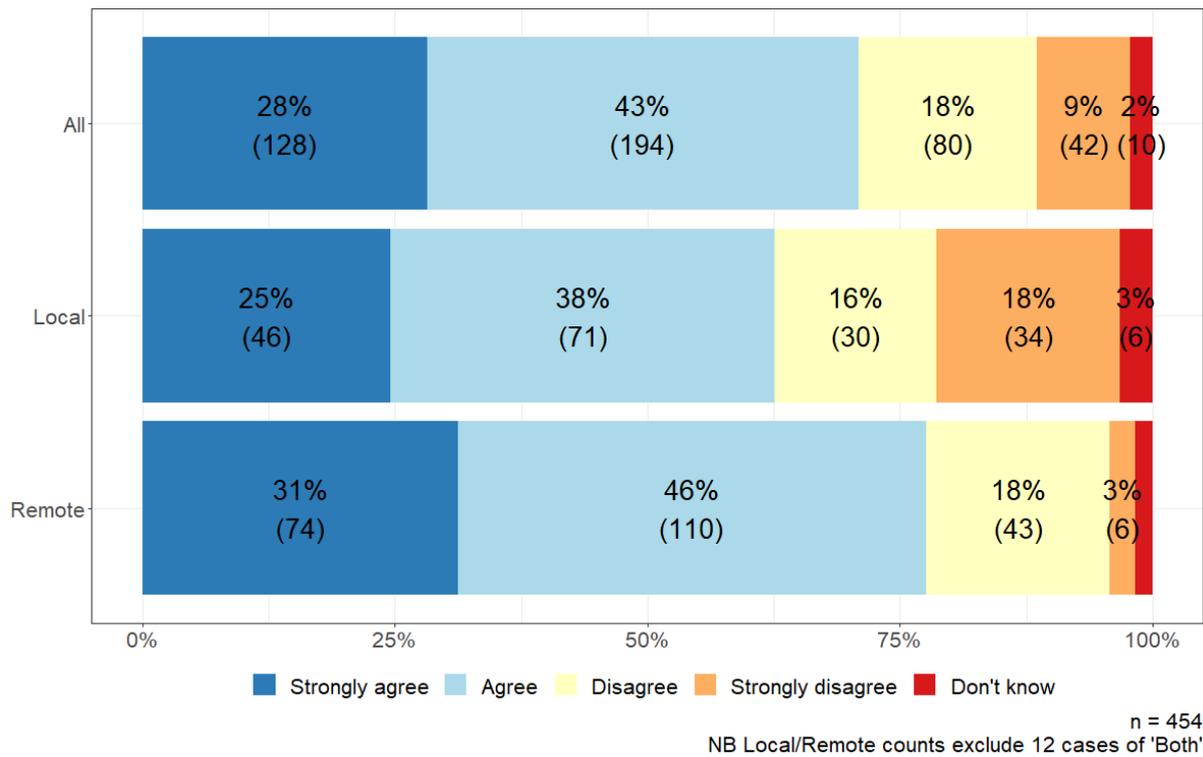
Figure 6. How much influence do you personally have on deciding what tasks you are to do?

n = 435
NB Local/Remote counts exclude 12 cases of 'Both'
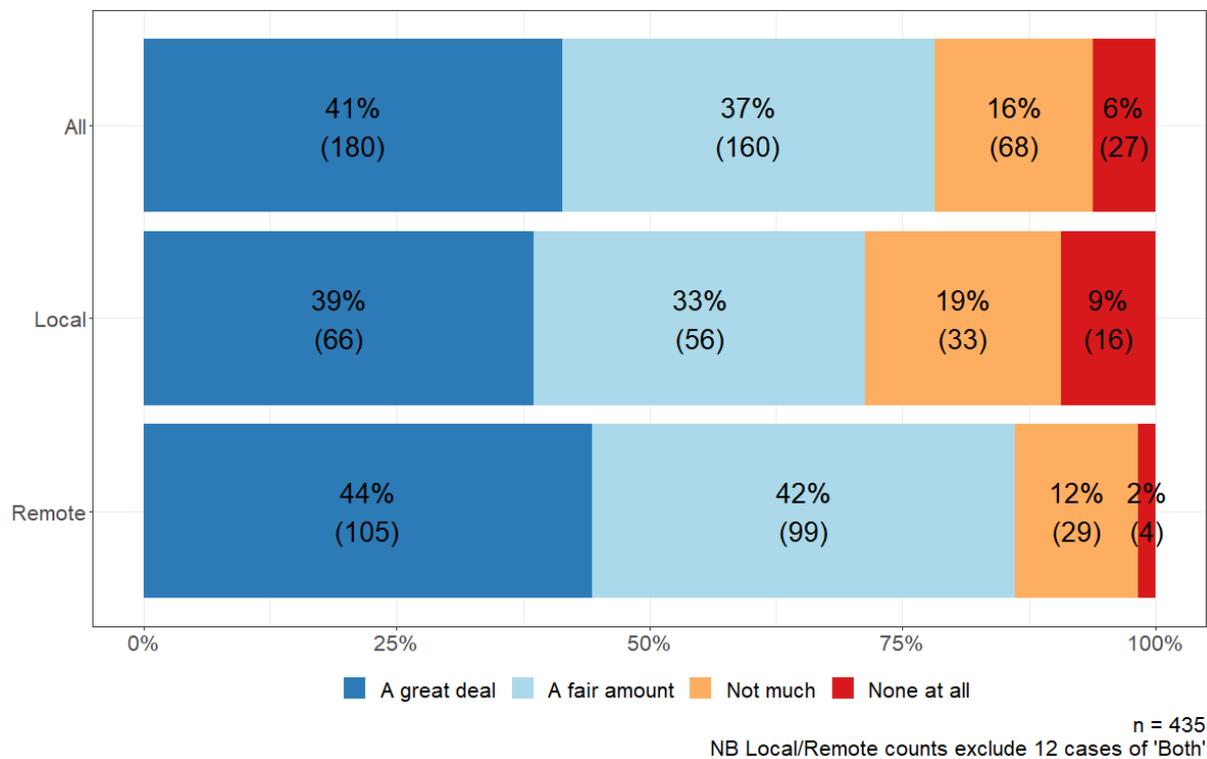
Figure 7. How much influence do you personally have on deciding on how you are to do the task?

A great deal   A fair amount   Not much   None at all

n = 435
NB Local/Remote counts exclude 12 cases of 'Both'

From Employment Rights to Labour Rights

Despite the data from Gig Rights Project Survey indicating that gig workers widely understand their work as constituting self-employment, we also find that these workers believe that an extension of labour rights to the self-employed would significantly improve their working lives. The Gig Rights Project Survey asked respondents to pick three labour rights from a list of 13 that would most benefit their working lives if applied to their platform work (see Methodological Appendix p.23 for a full list of these rights). Based on these responses the five most immediate priorities were: 'the national minimum wage' (41%), 'paid holiday time' (37%), 'payment whenever logged on to the platform/app and looking for work' (35%),[20] 'sick pay' (32%), and 'protection against unfair dismissal (including platform deactivation)' (30%).[21] These are all rights that the self-employed are currently excluded from and only apply to those legally classified as employees or workers. In fact, 94% of the respondents selected at least one of these five core employment rights in their top three rights with greatest potential to make a difference to their working life. These results imply that it is misplaced to assume that gig workers do not require labour rights because they are legally classified as self-employed and therefore supposedly able to negotiate with those purchasing their labour.

At the other end of the scale, 'collective negotiation of pay and conditions', 'access to a trade union representative', '48-hour limit to the working week', and a 'platform health and safety committee' were deemed less immediate priorities. While these findings might be surprising for trade unions, as we shall see later, they are likely a reflection of the perceived limited relative efficacy of trade unions to improve conditions in the gig economy rather than anti-union

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[20] The Supreme Court recently upheld that whenever logged onto the Uber app and ready and willing to accept trips Uber drivers were working and therefore entitled to minimum wage
https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2019-0029-judgment.pdf
[21] Sixth-placed 'guaranteed predictable weekly hours' was only 4 percentage points outside of the top five priorities there was then a seven percentage point drop to seventh place.

sentiment – in fact, when asked directly, our platform workers were actually highly supportive of forming trade unions themselves.

Whether respondents were undertaking remote or local gig work made little difference to the rights they felt had the greatest potential to improve their working lives. The only distinction being that remote gig workers selected 'protection against unfair dismissal (including platform deactivation)' in their four most immediate rights (with 35% for remote gig workers placing in their top three vs. 21% of local gig workers). Whereas local gig workers selected sick pay in theirs (with 40% of local gig workers placing it in their top three vs. 29% of remote gig workers). Having identified those rights that workers see as being of greatest benefit to their working lives if applied to the gig economy (minimum wages, paid holiday time, payment whenever logged on to the platform/app and looking for work, sick pay, protection against unfair dismissal (including platform deactivation), and, for remote gig workers guaranteed predictable hours), we now proceed to consider the wider policies that could potentially improve work in this sector.

Policies to Improve the Gig Economy: Co-determination, Co-working, and Income Smoothing

In addition to asking respondents what labour rights would most benefit their working lives we also developed with our advisory project partners a list of 15 potential wider policies that might benefit gig workers (see Methodological Appendix p.23 for a full list of the policies). For both local and remote gig workers, the most immediate priorities for improving their working lives were the policies connected to co-determination and the strengthening of worker voice beyond traditional trade union-facilitated collective bargaining. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) defines co-determination as 'a structure of decision-making within an enterprise whereby employees and their representatives exert influence on decisions, often at a senior level and at a relatively early stage.'[22] In the Gig Rights Project Survey we asked respondents to pick the top three most beneficial policies for improving their working lives. These policies included similarly popular policies offering differing degrees of co-determination. These policies were that all major platform changes that impact employment and working conditions be approved by an elected body of worker representatives (32%); that worker representatives be consulted on (rather than approving) all major changes to working practices and pay (31%); and platforms having to hold regular meetings at which workers could express their views about what's happening (30%). Additionally, the right-to-appeal platform deactivations or restrictions of work (29%) was similarly popular. In total 72% of workers selected some form of co-determination in their top three most beneficial policies for improving their working lives. Where remote and local workers diverged was in that having 'affordable co-working spaces where they could meet people doing similar work to themselves' was a priority for remote gig workers (28% vs. 6%), whereas, for local gig workers, a 'pay system where irregular earnings are evened out to provide a pay cheque that is similar each month' (28% vs. 21%) was deemed a greater priority.

Interestingly, very few workers felt that 'companies legally having to consult their workforce when introducing new technologies' was a priority for improving their working lives. This is a significant finding as such policies have been advocated by a number of academics and organisations as a response to the digitalisation of work. It also highlights that workers are keen to avoid a fixation with technology whereby its regulation becomes an end in itself, separate from issues of employment and working conditions. Likewise, there was little belief in the benefit of a data-centric approach whereby workers would have 'access to information about how the platform uses AI and algorithms and a right to request a personal and understandable

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[22] https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/co-determination

explanation'. Additionally, the 'right to disconnect' has frequently been trumpeted as means of countering overwork but workers in our survey did not feel that it would be of much benefit to them. Perhaps this was because low hourly rates (see below) meant that workers wanted to be free to connect whenever earning opportunities arose or that the high levels of flexibility identified above meant they already felt able to disconnect when they wanted to. Nevertheless, this is not to say that those advocating such policies are wrong to do so and if implemented they would be ineffectual in terms of improving the lives of gig workers. In fact, the opacity of algorithmic technologies means that the benefit of such policies may not be immediately obvious to workers. Nevertheless, it does suggest that advocates of these policies need to do a better job of communicating the benefits to workers. At present the benefit of these narrow-technology focused policies is seemingly not obvious to workers who instead see wider policies around broad notions of co-determination as having greater immediate potential.

The findings might again be surprising for trade unions with workers tending to feel that greater trade union access rights (e.g. trade unions having a right to contact workers to discuss their role) were a lower priority. In the next section, we will explore why this might be and why gig workers' scepticism towards the effectiveness of trade unions might explain the surprisingly strong support for the direct voice mechanism entailed by co-determination.

Collectivism, Voice and Trade Unions

As highlighted above, labour rights and government policies aimed at extending the reach of trade unions into the gig economy were generally a less immediate priority for workers. It was therefore surprising that when asked directly about their willingness to join or even organise a trade union, the response was overwhelmingly positive (see Figure 8.). Only 11% of our respondents were trade union members and only 5% engaged in trade union activities several times a month (including membership and activism not related to their platform work) while only 10% had participated in a coordinated group actions, such as, protests, memorials, demonstrations, strikes or logging out of the app.[23] However, 64% agreed or strongly agreed that they would join a trade union if there was one for workers on the main platform where they worked. This is a much higher level of support than previously found generally among non-union workers in UK. For instance, Charlwood (2002) and Bryson and Freeman (2007) find respectively that 40% and 46% respectively of non-union workers would join a union if their colleagues formed one at their workplace. However, what was particularly striking was that 54% agreed or strongly agreed that they 'would like to join with colleagues to assist in setting up a trade union' for their main platform.' Therefore, compared to workers generally, those in the gig economy seem much more supportive of trade unions. However, this support for joining and forming trade unions was tempered by a scepticism regarding their immediate effectiveness in the gig economy. For example, when asked how likely on a scale of 0-10 they were to join a trade union (or remain a member if already one) in the next two years the median score was 4. When asked to rate on a scale of 0-10 how important trade unions are for improving the working conditions of their platform work the median response was 5. When asked to rate how focused on achieving positive changes for your platform work are trade unions, the median response was again 5. That our respondents were ambivalent regarding the current ability and commitment of trade unions to supporting gig workers was also reflected in the fact that only 12% felt that they would turn to a trade union or other professional body for advice/assistance or guidance related to their working conditions, with workers being most likely to turn to the platform they work for, the Internet or family and friends for advice (see Figure 9.).
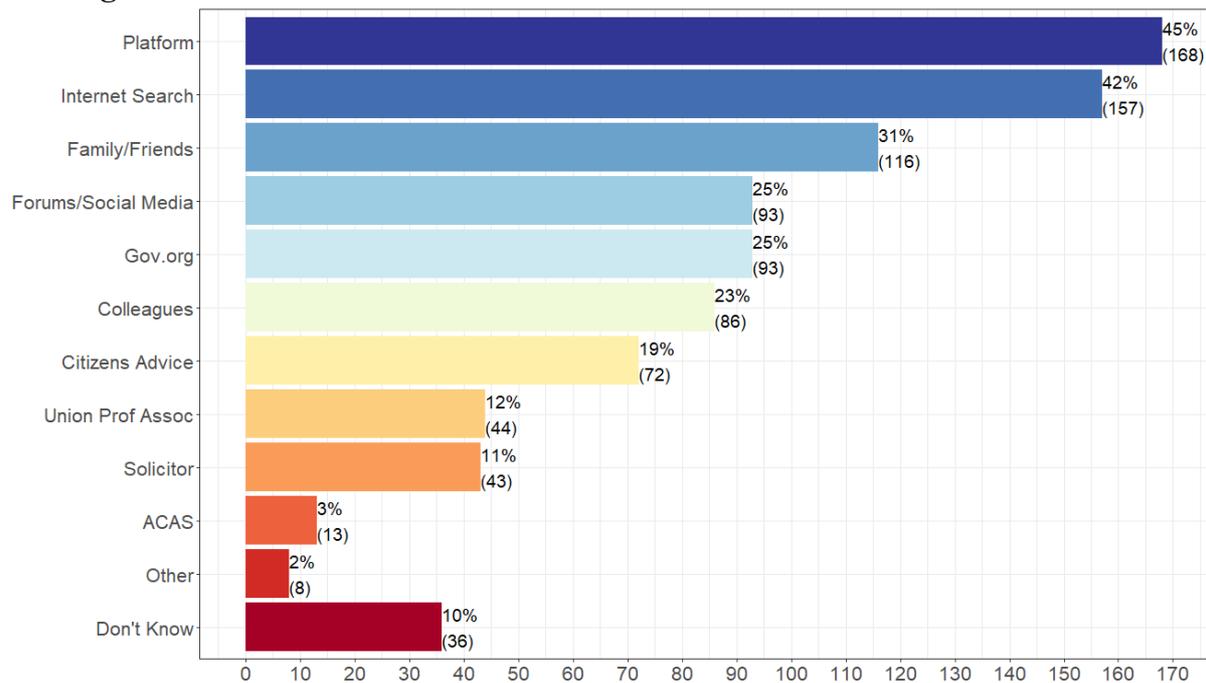
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[23] This reflects the low levels of trade union membership and involvement in coordinated group actions among gig workers globally (Hadwiger, 2022; ILO, 2021).

Figure 8. Support for collective organisation
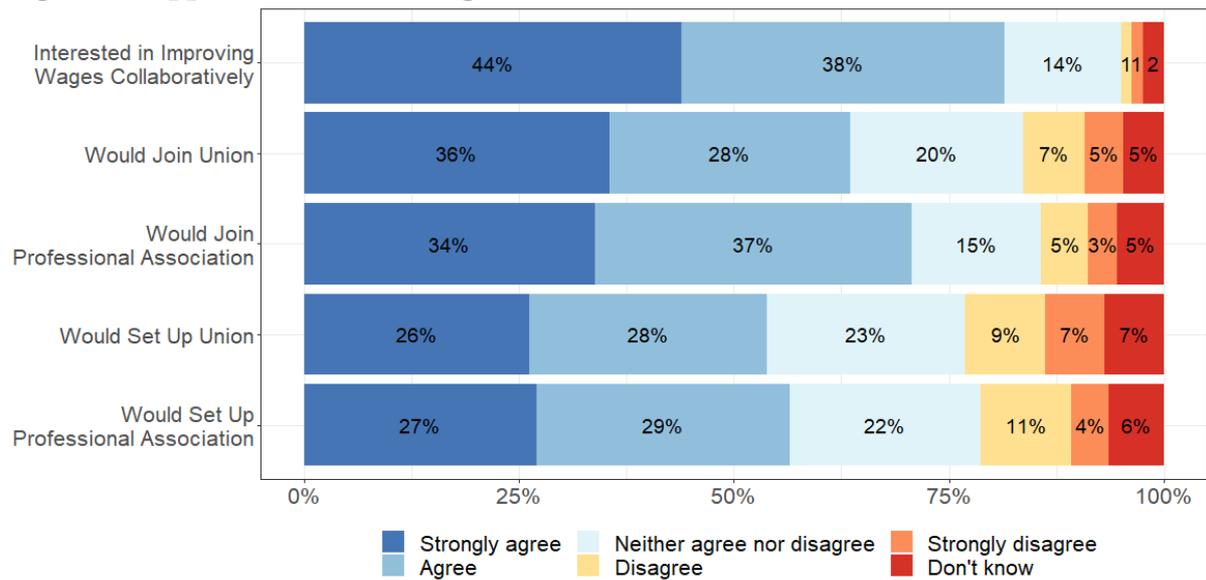
n = 418

Figure 9. Where would you go to find advice/assistance or guidance related to your working conditions?

n = 377
NB: n is lower than sum of columns due to multiple responses

That our respondents were ambivalent regarding the immediate focus and potential of trade unions in the gig economy perhaps explains their strong support for non-union forms of worker voice, such as co-determination. Moreover, local gig economy workers were much more likely to be engaged in a trade union than their remote counterparts (23% were members and 19% had participated in coordinated group actions such as a protests, memorials, demonstrations, strikes or logging out of the app). Greater trade union activity and engagement potentially influence perceptions of trade union efficacy with local gig workers saying they are more likely to join or remain a member of a union in the next 2 years (with a median response on a scale of 0-10 of 5 as opposed to 3). However, we cannot rule out reverse causality. Likewise, these workers

regarded trade unions as more important for improving the working conditions of their platform work (with a median of 7 vs. 5 on a scale of 0-10) and more focused on achieving positive changes for their platform work (with a median of 5 vs. 4). This suggests that workers' ambivalence towards the efficacy of trade unions may in part be rooted in the lack of attention that unions have provided to these workers in the past; where they have been active, such as in some aspects of the local gig economy, workers have responded positively. If trade unions generally were to expand the efforts of unions already underway by unions such as the ADCU, IWGB and GMB in local gig work, then workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of unions may become more positive.

In fact, we find a strong sense of collectivism among gig workers, with these workers being just as enthusiastic about other ways of working cooperatively. For instance, similar numbers were enthusiastic about improving wages collaboratively, and joining and assisting in setting up professional associations for platform work as they were about unions. Additionally, workers were even more positive regarding their likelihood of joining professional or trade organisations (e.g. an association for photographers, designers or taxi drivers); solo self-employment (freelancers) organisations (such as IPSE (the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed); and co-working spaces. However, the respondents as a whole were just as ambivalent towards the focus of such alternative organisations on achieving positive changes for platform work as they were towards trade unions. It was only solo self-employed organisations that were viewed as being more immediately important for improving working conditions in the gig economy. Additionally, local gig workers were more positive regarding the focus and importance of professional or trade organisations than remote gig workers – possibly due to the historical role of such associations in industries such as taxi and private hire driving. This was the only major sectoral difference in worker views towards these alternative forms of collectivism.

This strong sense of collectivism was also reflected in the political orientation of our respondents with large majorities agreeing or strongly agreeing that Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off (59%), that big business benefits owners at the expense of workers (75%), that ordinary working people don't get a fair share of the nation's wealth (71%), that there's one law for the rich and one for the poor (66%), and that management will always try to get the better of employees if they get the chance (68%). Moreover, around twice as many respondents supported left-of-centre parties (Labour, Green, SNP, Sinn Fein, SDLP, Plaid Cymru) as did right-of-centre ones (Conservative, Brexit/Reform, DUP) both in terms of who they voted for in 2019 and who they would vote for at the time of the survey (Spring 2022). In fact, not voting among those eligible to vote was a more popular choice than the combined support for right-of-centre parties.

Job quality explanations for collectivism, support for employment rights and co-determination

Pay and dependency

Why do gig workers who see their work as constituting self-employment and who experience autonomy and flexibility feel that the extension of labour rights and policies usually associated with standard employment (minimum wage, paid holiday, payment when logged on, and sick pay) would positively impact their working lives? The most obvious reason is that this work is frequently an important source of income for our respondents and that it is currently poorly compensated. The imposition of a wage floor would substantially strengthen the ability of many workers to make ends meet. Indeed, our respondents reported that their real gross hourly rate of pay (i.e. what they earned on average per hour including waiting times before tax and other deductions) was low and often below minimum wage (with the median rate being £8.97 per hour). In fact, 52% of our respondents were earning below the minimum wage (£9.50) when

waiting time was taken into account. Pay was higher in the remote gig economy (median =£10) than the local gig economy (median = £8). One factor contributing to our respondents' low rates of pay was that they reported spending significant amounts of time logged on to their platform and waiting for or looking for work (median = 5 hours per week). The Supreme Court recently upheld that Uber drivers were working whenever logged onto the Uber app and ready and willing to accept trips and therefore entitled to minimum wage.[24] If this ruling were applied across the gig economy it would mean, all other things being equal, that our median respondent would earn at least an additional £48 extra a week. These findings are in line with other studies that highlight the low pay of gig work in the UK.[25]

Poor pay in the gig economy is often justified by the suggestion that gig work is just a side job that provides students and workers with other jobs and a bit of additional spending money. Our data suggests that such views are largely fiction. Although only 29% of our respondents reported earning at least 90% from gig work and only 39% worked at least 37.5 hours doing this work. it was still an important source of work for many with the median respondent spending 28 hours a week doing this work and it constituting 60% of their total income (mean = 39 hours week and 58% of total income). In fact, 76% of our respondents reported that platform work provided at least 25% of their total earnings. The current cost of living crisis is likely to increase the importance of income from the gig economy while pushing more people into platform work and, therefore, lowering rates and increasing competition for gigs.

Risk, insecurity, intensity and influence

Support for sick pay and protection against unfair dismissal (including platform deactivation) can be understood as a response to gig work not only being poorly paid but also very risky and insecure. Shockingly, 40% of our respondents felt there was a chance of them losing their ability to make a living on their main platform and becoming unemployed in the next twelve months. This suggests that gig workers are much more likely to feel they are at risk of unemployment than workers generally. For example, the 2017 Skills and Employment Survey found that only around 9% of all workers felt there was a chance of becoming unemployed in the next 12 months. Additionally, as can be seen in Figure 10. other types of work-related insecurity[26] are widespread among our respondents. For instance, 65% were anxious regarding their future pay; 54% about having less say over how their job is done; 53% about it becoming more difficult for them to use their skills.

Again, this insecurity is much more widespread among our respondents than in the labour market generally, with, for example, the 2017 Skills and Employment Survey finding that around 25% experienced these anxieties[27]. Another very widespread source of insecurity was unexpected changes to hours with 51% of gig workers experiencing this anxiety. This insecurity is also substantially more widespread than among the general population, with the 2017 Skills and Employment Survey finding only 7% of all workers were anxious regarding unexpected changes to their hours. Moreover, in line with recent findings that platform algorithms might amplify precarity by creating a new type of 'reputational insecurity'[28], 67% of our respondents agreed that they worry about clients giving them unfair feedback that impacts their future income.

Additionally, 28% of our respondents felt that they were risking their health or safety in doing gig work while, 26% experienced physical pain as a result of their work. While remote workers

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[24] https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2019-0029-judgment.pdf.
[25] Berger et al. (2019); CIPD (2017); Lepanjuuri et al. (2018).
[26] Standing (1999); Wood and Burchell (2018).
[27] Felstead et al. (2017).
[28] Wood and Lehdonvirta (2022).

experienced high levels of anxiety (41% of workers reported being very anxious on at least one of four measures of anxiety (regarding pay, say over how the job is done, skill use and unexpected changes) and 76% reported being 'fairly' or 'very' anxious on at least one of these measures) the extent of this insecurity among local gig workers tended to be substantially greater (with 55% being very anxious and 81% 'very' or 'fairly' anxious). As Figure 11. highlights, local gig workers were also much more likely to feel they were risking their health or safety (50% vs 11%) and to report they experience pain as a result of their work (42% vs 13%). The greater risk, pain and insecurity that these workers experienced possibly explains their stronger support for sick pay – as might the greater ease with which remote gig workers can continue working when sick. These physical risks of gig work are perhaps unsurprising given that the intensity of gig work has been highlighted by existing studies.[29] In the Gig Rights Project Survey nearly half of our respondents (48%) said their work involved working to tight deadlines at least three-quarters of the time.[30] The insecurity, risk and intensity of this work is also likely one factor explaining why gig workers are so keen to gain greater say over their working conditions via co-determination and trade unions.

Figure 10. Work-related insecurity
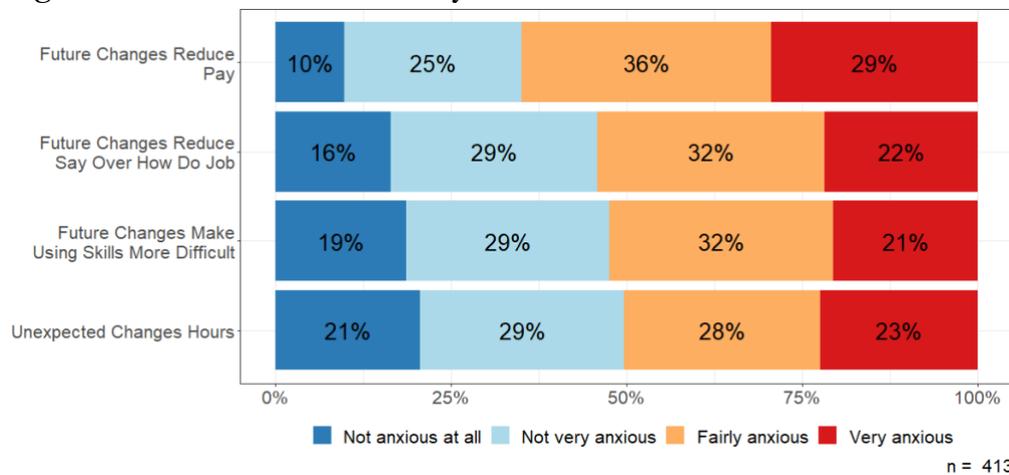
Figure 11. Risk to health and safety
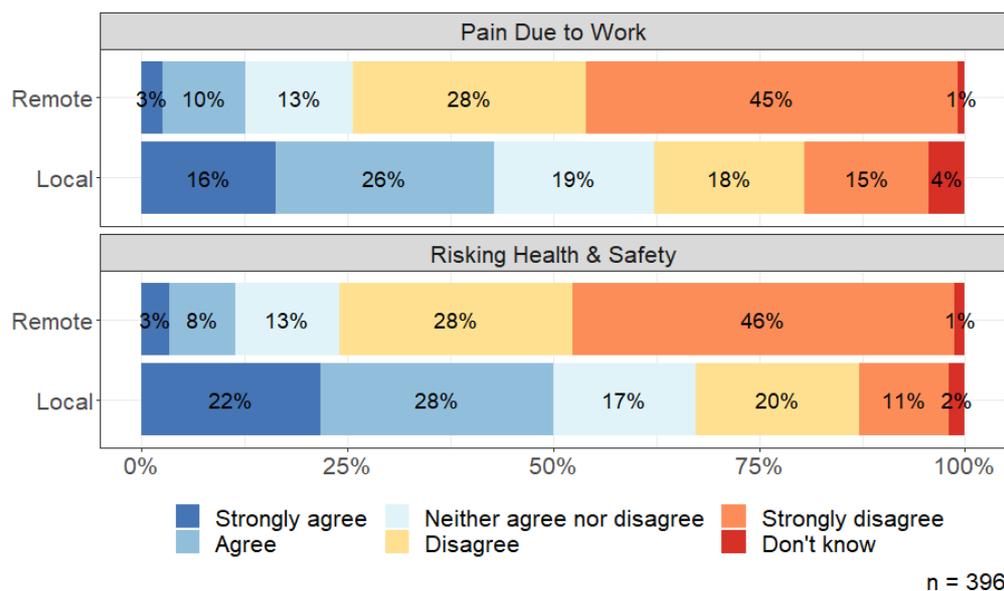
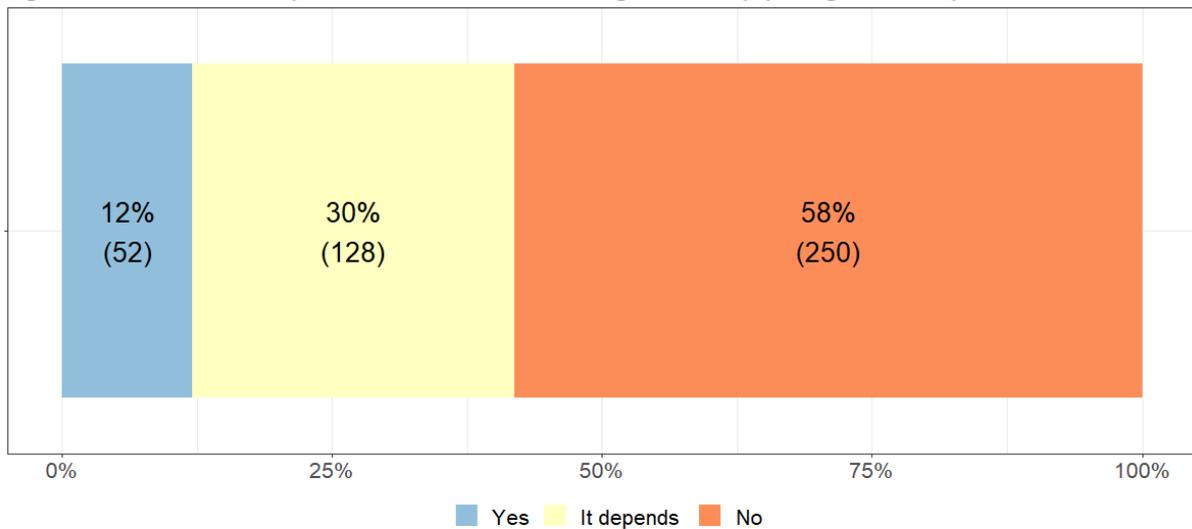NB: excludes 13 responses including both 'Remote' and 'Local'

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[29] Wood et al. (2019).
[30] Although it should be noted that intense working is a widespread feature of the UK labour market. The 2017 Skills and Employment Survey finds similarly high numbers working to tight deadlines across the UK (Green et al., 2022).
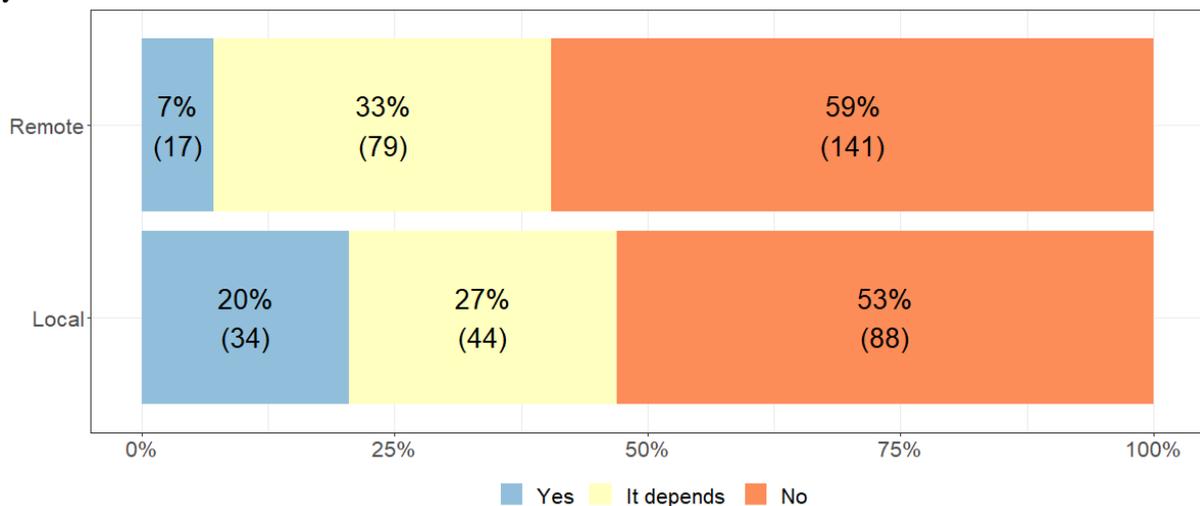
Influence

Despite its importance for making ends meet and the harms and risks gig work entails for both mental wellbeing and physical health; 58% of our respondents felt that they would not have any say in decisions that changed the way they went about their work (see Figure 12.). This lack of organisational voice helps explain the high levels of support for trade unions, state protections against the power of platforms and the creation of platform councils and assemblies to give workers a voice in decisions that so impact their livelihoods. As illustrated by Figure 13., there was little difference between local and remote gig workers in terms of those who felt they were more likely to feel that they have a say (20% vs. 7%) with remote workers being more likely to say it depends.

Figure 12. Personal say in decisions that change the way you go about your work

Figure 13. Remote vs. local: personal say in decisions that change the way you go about your work

Summary and policy implications

Implications for Government

- *Provide labour rights (minimum wage, paid holiday, sick pay, and protection against unfair dismissal) for platform workers.*

The above findings make clear how low pay, anxiety, and stress blight the lives of many workers in the UK gig economy.[31] The findings also provide a compelling case for expanding the existing 'worker status' so that it includes all those whose work is organised through a digital labour platform and undertaken by an individual on the basis of a contractual relationship.[32] These rights include the minimum wage and paid holiday time but need to be expanded so that all workers also receive sick pay and protection against unfair dismissal (including platform deactivation). These rights should be available to all workers from day one and, in the gig economy, platform companies would be responsible for ensuring these rights are respected. This proposal is in line with recent calls by the International Labour Organization for the establishment of a 'Universal Labour Guarantee' that would ensure protection to all workers regardless of contractual states.[33] While being paid whenever logged on to the platform/app and looking for work was also a priority for our respondents, its application to those platforms where workers can spend an unlimited time searching for work and choose, to varying degrees, the jobs they do would be challenging to implement. As platforms would have to limit the time workers spend searching for work this could be detrimental to both workers and clients in reducing their ability to achieve positive matches. An alternative would be for the minimum pay rate to be set at a high enough level that the median worker on that platform is compensated adequately for their time looking for work. Based on our survey this would mean the minimum rate across the gig economy would need to encompass an additional payment of £2.38, taking the present minimum rate to £12.80 per hour – however, in practice, this additional payment would vary according to platform. The calculation of this rate could be overseen by the platform representative councils discussed below. These councils would be granted access to the necessary platform business data and the means to survey workers. The provision of these rights should apply irrespective of employment status due to the existence of digital platforms – powerful third parties that not only provide digital infrastructures but also create, strategically manage, and govern access to jobs and ultimately determine the terms under which they are undertaken.[34]

The low pay and poor conditions that we find in the UK gig economy are exactly the kind of market failures that labour rights were envisioned to protect against. Our findings demonstrate that whether someone is classified as an employee, worker, or self-employed according to traditional conceptions, is immaterial to the exploitation and dependency they can face when they rely on labour platforms to make a living. The vast majority of our respondents felt their work was best described as self-employment (i.e. working as a freelancer or independent contractor) and this we believe is likely to be a reflection of the high levels of flexibility, autonomy, and discretion they experience.

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[31] Indeed an analysis of global media coverage of local gig worker mobilisation (including in the UK) finds that by far the most common protest issue to be that of pay, with working conditions, employment status, and health and safety also being prominent areas of contention (Bessa et al. 2022).

[32] The proposed EU Directive on Platform Work provides a useful definition of platform work which can form the basis for identifying who these rights should apply to i.e. all cases where the work is organised through a digital labour platform and undertaken by an individual on the basis of a contractual relationship between the platform and the individual, irrespective of whether a contractual relationship exists between the individual and the recipient of the service.

[33] ILO (2019) Work for a brighter future – Global Commission on the Future of Work.

[34] Wood and Lehdonvirta (2022).

- *Require platforms to set up representative councils that must approve all major platform changes that impact jobs and working conditions, be consulted at an early stage on planned changes, and oversee appeals and minimum pay rates.*

Despite seeing themselves as self-employed, and thus legally constituting their own businesses (colloquially 'being their own boss'), our respondents also highlighted the need for policies that would legally ensure their participation in platform decision-making. In particular, the asymmetry in power relations between self-employed workers and the platforms they rely on to make a living means that Swedish-style co-determination rights should be introduced for all platform workers via the creation of 'platform councils'. Platform councils would be made up of elected representatives (at least three representatives, with one additional representative for every thousand workers using the platform, up to a maximum size of 35 representatives – as is the case with German works councils). Approval would be needed from these platform councils for all major platform changes that impact UK jobs and working conditions, including but not limited to the implementation of new technologies and changes to algorithms. They would also need to be consulted on planned changes at an early stage to ensure a meaningful input into decisions and would be able to request the business information necessary to make informed decisions. These councils would also oversee appeals regarding platform deactivations or restrictions to ensure the fairness of the process and be able to refer cases to employment tribunals. Finally, these councils would ensure the application of the above labour rights and report platform companies to the employment tribunal for failure to comply. For example, where a platform entails complex piece rates or project work the platform council would set minimum rates that ensure the average worker earns at least the minimum wage. Where workers feel they are being paid an effective rate that is below the minimum wage they would be able to ask the council to investigate and set a new rate for that type of work. These councils could also set minimum pay rates that ensure that the median worker on the platform earns at least the minimum wage when time looking for work is accounted for (see above). The platform councils would be granted access to the necessary platform business data and the means to survey workers regarding the time they spend looking for work. The representatives would be compensated for their time undertaking this function at the average rate of a worker on the platform. Research from Germany demonstrates that works councils can be an effective means of regulating platform-style algorithmic management and avoiding negative consequences for workers.[35]

- *Require platform companies to hold regular online general platform assemblies where workers can ask questions and express their views on the running of the platform.*

Platforms should also have to hold regular online general platform assemblies (at least three a year) that are open to all workers on the platforms to attend and express their views about what is happening and question management and their platform council representatives.

- *Develop a nationwide publicly owned network of co-working spaces.*

Additionally, to help further foster collectivism among spatially fragmented remote gig workers and overcome social isolation the state should develop a nationwide publicly owned network of co-working spaces that provide high-quality workspaces for freelancers at affordable prices in all midsized and large cities.

- *Develop a financial facility that evens out irregular earnings*

Finally, the government should develop a financial facility that local gig workers can use to even out irregular earnings to provide a pay cheque that is similar each month.

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[35] Doellgast et al. (2022); Krzywdzinski et al. (2022).

Implications for Trade Unions

- *Increase campaigning and organising activities in the gig economy and support workers in joining and forming unions.*

Our findings also have policy implications for trade unions. UK gig workers exhibit high levels of collectivism with these individuals not only tending to hold left-wing political beliefs but also being enthusiastic about working cooperatively to improve wages collaboratively and joining and assisting in setting up professional associations, freelancer organisations, and co-working spaces. Additionally, we find they are much more willing to join and set up trade unions than workers are generally. However, this enthusiasm is tempered by scepticism regarding the immediate effectiveness of trade unions in the gig economy and, as a result, few workers said they would turn to a trade union or other professional body for advice/assistance or guidance related to their working conditions. However, local gig workers were more positive regarding the efficacy of trade unions, interestingly unions such as ADCU, IWGB, and GMB, have been more active in this sector, suggesting that if trade unions were to expand these efforts then workers' perceptions of the potential benefits of unions may shift, making gig workers an unusually receptive audience for the labour movement.

Methodological appendix

The population of UK gig workers is unknown and thus no robust sampling frame exists. As a result traditional survey sampling techniques are not possible; surveys that attempt to use quota sampling, for instance, often end up with implausible estimates of the size of the population and thus seemingly suffer from significant unobserved self-selection bias.[36] In our study we have sought a strategically targeted sample which includes good representation across conceptually important categories, such as remote or local gig work, migrant or UK born, male or female, younger or older, and more or less educated. By doing so we are able to highlight where outcomes seem unlikely to be influenced by such characteristics due to the absence of substantial differences between subsamples as well as investigating instances that are more likely to be sensitive to the actual makeup of the gig worker population. To generate our targeted sample we advertised our survey directly to UK workers active on platforms.[37] Using Facebook Ads enabled us to directly target our survey at users who, for example, listed their interests as 'Ubereats', 'delivery (commerce)', 'Uber (company)', 'Drive with Uber', 'Taxi Driver', 'Hybrid electric vehicle', 'TaskRabbit', 'Care.com'. or Airtasker; their employer as 'Deliveroo', or their job title as 'delivery' 'Taxi Cab Driver' or 'Car Driver'. Users matching these interests, employer or job titles were targeted with bespoke adverts deigned for delivery, drivers and domestic gig workers (see examples below) on Facebook and Instagram. Therefore, between March and June 2022, the Gig Rights Project surveyed 510 UK gig economy workers active on Facebook or Upwork. Facebook Ads were used to reach 1.2 million people of whom 15,500 people clicked through to the Gig Rights Project Survey landing page. The survey could be completed in English, Bengali, Polish, Portuguese or Spanish. By doing so we were able to collect data from 257 workers in the local gig economy. The three main platforms being used by workers were Deliveroo, UberEats and Uber. We supplemented this data with data from 253 remote gig workers; randomly selected from the Upwork platform in line with quotas for task and gender derived from the Online Labour Index[38]. Our survey questions were developed with input from our advisory partners Acas, CIPD, ILO, RSA and TUC and piloted with two current remote gig workers, a former delivery local gig worker, a former ride-hail local gig worker, and a current handyperson local gig worker. Where possible, to ease comparison with the general population and enhance the validity of questions we also based our survey items on established social surveys including the Skills and Employment Survey; European Working Conditions Survey; Understanding Society; British Social Attitudes Survey; COLLEEM Survey. Improvements were made to the wording of the questions based on the feedback provided during the piloting but overall this exercise demonstrated the underlying validity of our questions. As stated previously, our aim was not to generate a representative sample of the UK gig economy but rather a sample of sufficient size and diversity to explore within-population differences.

Unlike many analyses of quantitative survey data, our analyses are not preoccupied with determining which of the effects we are interested in are "statistically significant". It has been repeatedly argued recently that the whole logic of "Null Hypothesis Significance Testing" (NHST) has been a distorting and disruptive influence in the sciences and social sciences. There are many converging arguments around this. Firstly, researchers become preoccupied with searching for "P<0.05" rather than examining the data for clues that actually throw light on the phenomena that they are interested in. Secondly, many of the datasets that are used do not satisfy the theoretical preconditions of NHST – for instance being a sample drawn at random
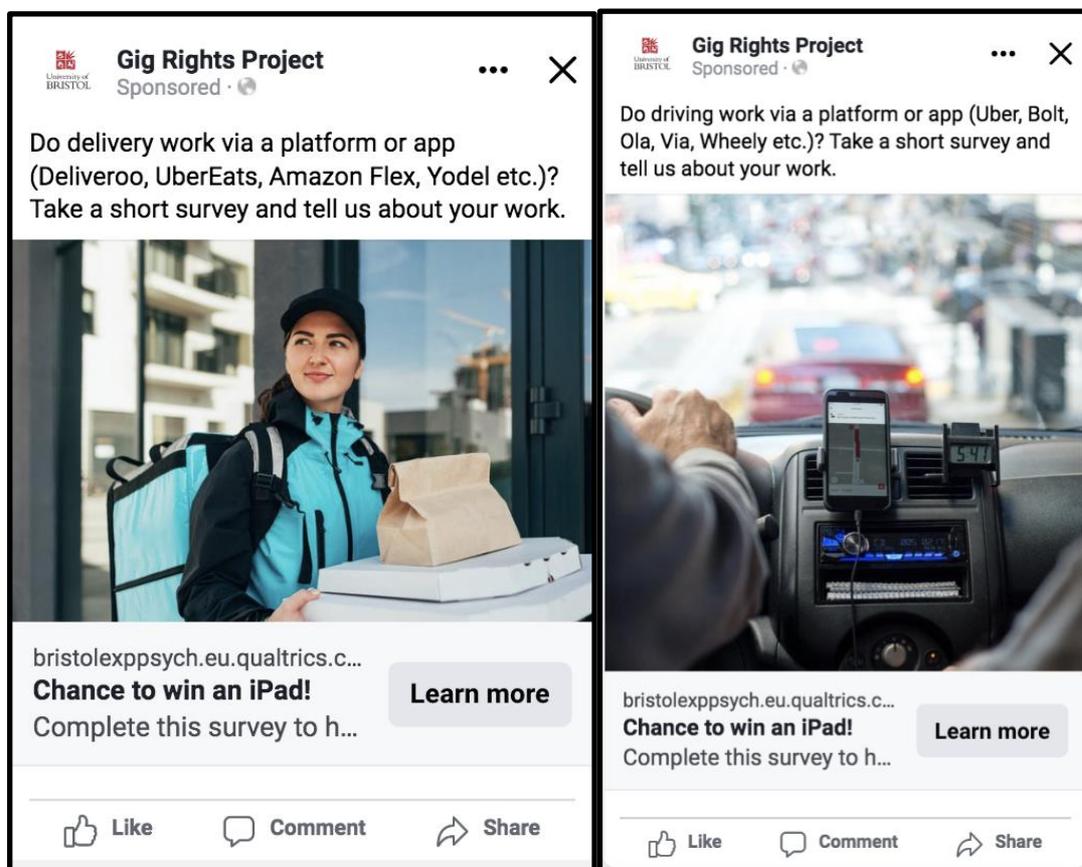
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[36] Piasna (2020).

[37] In doing so we followed the example of previous research into both the local gig economy Griesbach et al. (2019) and Milkman et al. (2021) and the remote gig economy Wood et al. (2021).

[38] http://onlinelabourobservatory.org/.

from a population. Third, NHST is widely held to be in part responsible for the 'replication crisis' and even encouraging scientific fraud in many disciplines.

The response to this has been varied. Some journals have banned the use of P values, and some researchers have rejected frequentist approaches for a Bayesian logic. In the case of this report, we have a moderate sample size, and although we have gone to greater lengths to maximise the representativeness of our sample than most researchers, we are aware of the possible shortfalls of our sample. We therefore approach our data with an 'Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) approach and give summary statistics such as percentages and median values, but we don't calculate P values nor do we make claims about the representativeness of the sample, whether to other gig workers in the UK in 2021/22 or to any other specific sample. We believe that this pragmatic approach enhances the quality and usefulness of our analyses.

Rights and policy options presented to respondents

Please choose the three labour rights which would most benefit your working life if applied to your platform work:
- 'The national minimum wage'
- 'Payment whenever logged on to the platform/app and looking for work'
- 'Flexibility to log on to the platform whenever you want, even if you are only paid when providing a service to client/customer'
- 'Sick Pay'
- 'Paid holiday time'
- 'Paid family leave, e.g. maternity, paternity, adoption'
- 'Collective negotiation of pay and conditions'
- 'Access to a trade union representative'
- '48-hour limit to the working week'
- 'Platform health and safety committee'
- 'Employer contributions to your pension or retirement savings'
- 'Guaranteed predictable weekly hours'
- 'Protection against unfair dismissal (including platform deactivation)'
- Other please specify:

Thinking about your platform work, please choose the three policies that would most benefit your working life:
- 'Your platform to hold regular meetings at which workers can express their views about what is happening'
- 'All major changes to the platform that impact employment and working conditions being approved by an elected body of worker representatives'
- 'Trade unions to have a right to contact workers to discuss their role'
- 'Consultation with workers on major changes to working practices and pay'
- 'A pay system where irregular earnings are evened out to provide a pay cheque that is similar each month'
- 'Companies legally having to consult their workforce when introducing new technologies'
- 'Government provided life-long skills training to help you transition to another type of work'
- 'Human reviews of all major automated decisions that affect your ability to make a living (such as ratings and deactivations)'
- 'Protection against the discriminatory or inaccurate use of data'
- 'The right to disconnect from work to create 'communication-free' time'
- 'Ready access to information about how the platform uses AI and algorithms and a right to request a personal and understandable explanation'
- 'Affordable co-working spaces where you could meet people doing similar work to yourself'
- 'The right to appeal platform deactivations or restrictions of work'

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