Reclaiming the Platform Economy through Social Solidarity

RIPESS Position Paper for the 113th International Labour Conference

I. The Problem: Precarity by Design

The rise of the platform economy has transformed the world of work. Promoted as a solution for efficiency, convenience, and flexibility, digital labour platforms have become central to service delivery across sectors—from transportation and food delivery to domestic work and digital freelancing. However, this transformation has not been accompanied by a parallel improvement in labour standards. On the contrary, most platform workers face increasing precarity, insecurity, and exclusion.

Under the guise of innovation, many platforms have reclassified employment relationships to avoid obligations related to wages, benefits, or protections. Workers are labeled as "independent contractors," thereby stripping them of collective bargaining rights, minimum wage guarantees, or access to social protection. Algorithms act as invisible managers, allocating work, setting pay, and monitoring performance without being held accountable. The opaque and asymmetrical nature of these systems exacerbates worker vulnerability and undermines labour dignity. The platform economy can also be a source of perpetuation of dual burdens of gender roles or other forms of discrimination. A perspective of Intersectionality must be included to raise awareness of the different forms in which the platform economy can create digital barriers.

The often-cited trade-off between flexibility and protection has been used to justify the erosion of labour rights, yet this framing is misleading and harmful. Flexibility need not come at the cost of security. Workers can and should enjoy flexible working arrangements within a framework that ensures decent work, fair pay, and dignity.

In contexts where regulation is lacking or unclear, the situation becomes even more critical. Tensions often arise between platform workers and traditional workers in the same sector, such as licensed transport providers or domestic workers, leading to conflict, mistrust, and social fragmentation. This regulatory vacuum not only exacerbates inequality but also impedes opportunities for an inclusive digital transition.

II. Fairwork as a Benchmark for Equity

The Fairwork initiative has become a vital reference point for assessing and improving labour conditions in the platform economy. It identifies five universal principles of fair platform work:

1. **Fair Pay** – ensuring workers receive at least a living wage.

2. **Fair Conditions** – providing safe working environments and mechanisms to reduce risks.

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3. **Fair Contracts** – making terms and conditions clear, transparent, and accessible.

4. **Fair Management** – ensuring due process, equity, and accountability in management practices.

5. **Fair Representation** – guaranteeing workers' rights to organize and be heard.

These principles have helped shift the discourse from technological determinism to a human-centered approach to accountability. They provide a framework that civil society, governments, and platforms themselves can use to identify gaps, push for reform, and promote best practices. But to truly transform the platform economy, these benchmarks must be embedded in a broader paradigm that prioritizes values over profit.

The care economy and domestic work have historically been jobs performed by women, and they have been burdened by informality, poverty, exclusion, and non-recognition. Women have organized to confront this exclusion, first in the form of the SSE, and now through the use of digital solidarity platforms to improve both their work and representation.

III. From Benchmarking to Building: SSE and Platform Cooperativism as Pathways to a Just Digital Economy

The Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) offers a holistic, rights-based alternative to the extractive model of digital capitalism. It promotes an economy that works for people and the planet, fostering equity, sustainability, and cooperation rather than maximizing shareholder value.

In the context of the platform economy, SSE reframes digital platforms as common goods—digital infrastructures collectively created, governed, and sustained by the communities and workers who rely on them. This reorientation shifts the worker's role from a passive input to an active co-designer, co-creator, co-manager, and co-contributor—in short, a co-owner—embedding platforms within a participatory, community-rooted logic.

One of the clearest operational expressions of SSE in the digital realm is platform cooperativism. This approach offers a structural alternative to dominant digital business models, enabling the creation of democratic, worker-centered enterprises from the ground up. Rooted in cooperative principles, platform co-ops operationalize non-extractive, community-driven approaches to digital work. These principles are not merely ethical ideals; they serve as concrete and actionable guidelines for building platforms that are governed by—and accountable to—the people who depend on them.

The global platform cooperativism movement—advanced by networks of workers, activists, and researchers, including initiatives like the Platform Cooperativism Consortium at The New School—has helped articulate this vision. Through research, advocacy, and international coordination, it has strengthened the case for democratic digital ownership and inspired the development of cooperative platforms worldwide.

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It is often assumed that platform cooperatives operate only at a modest scale. However, this assumption overlooks the fact that several cooperative digital platforms already serve large and diverse user bases, demonstrating that cooperative models can indeed function at considerable scale. Their impact is not defined solely by size, but by the values they institutionalize—democracy, equity, and collective control.

Moreover, the central issue is not merely the ownership of digital "tools"—a term that may understate the complexity and function of these systems—but rather the governance of digital infrastructures themselves. These platforms mediate labor, coordinate decentralized collectives, and sustain federated ecosystems. They should be understood as collective action responses to the extractive dynamics of the dominant platform economy, resisting both the co-optation of cooperative principles and the exploitative logic of corporate intermediaries.

Together, the SSE framework and platform cooperativism chart a path beyond critique. They embody a vision for democratic digital futures, anchored in shared ownership, inclusive governance, and solidarity-driven economies.

IV. Policy Recommendations

To support a just, inclusive, and sustainable digital economy grounded in solidarity, RIPESS calls for the following policy directions:

1. Embed Fairwork principles into national and international labour standards, ensuring that all platform workers have access to decent work conditions. Beyond legal mandates, lead firms in global and local supply chains should be encouraged to adopt Fairwork benchmarks into their procurement policies, creating upstream accountability and leveraging buyer power to raise labour standards across the platform economy.

2. Recognize platform workers as workers under labour law, granting them full labour rights, access to social protection, and the freedom to organize. Legal clarity must be established to prevent the misclassification of workers and to uphold fundamental labour rights in digital work environments.

3. Support the development of platform cooperatives through targeted funding, capacity-building, tax incentives, and inclusion in public procurement frameworks. Crucially, this support must be underpinned by legislative reform, including the modernization of cooperative laws to reflect the needs of digital and transnational enterprises. Particular attention should be paid to enabling the incorporation of globally oriented cooperatives, especially in the Global South, where current legal frameworks may exclude international membership. Legal parity with dominant platform firms must also be ensured, so that cooperative models are not disadvantaged in terms of access to capital, markets, or regulatory environments.

4. Promote open digital infrastructures and the digital commons through sustained public investment in interoperable, inclusive, and community-controlled technological ecosystems. These efforts must be operationalized through public digital frameworks that enable cooperatives and community-based platforms to interface effectively with digital infrastructure. Without this scaffolding, the development of autonomous

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capacities—such as cooperative-led algorithmic systems or digital public services—will remain out of reach, deepening dependence on extractive corporate platforms.

5. Ensure participatory governance in the regulation of platforms, including meaningful worker and community input in platform rule-making, algorithmic decision-making, and data governance. Participatory structures must be institutionalized and not merely consultative, recognizing affected groups as co-governors, not passive stakeholders.

6. Integrate the Social and Solidarity Economy into digital transition strategies, positioning it as a central pillar in post-pandemic recovery, youth employment, care economy, and green transition policies. SSE should not be treated as a marginal alternative, but as a transformative pathway for ensuring inclusive, sustainable, and rights-based digital development.

V. Conclusion: Reclaiming the Digital Future

The platform economy has become a defining feature of our time. It reflects not only technological transformation, but also the values and power structures that shape our societies. Will we accept a digital economy built on precarity, opacity, and exclusion, or will we seize the opportunity to reclaim digital infrastructures as tools for justice, democracy, and solidarity?

This question has become even more urgent. Recent reports have revealed that the digital infrastructure supporting international civil society is under severe threat, with key platforms and tools used by NGOs, cooperative networks, and grassroots movements at risk of collapse or co-optation. If these spaces vanish, the fragile architectures of global solidarity and resistance will vanish with them.

The future of work—and the future of democracy—depends on our ability to build non-extractive, community-rooted digital systems. Workers, communities, and cooperatives must be at the forefront of this transformation, reimagining the rules, ownership models, and governance structures of the platform economy. SSE offers the compass, and platform cooperativism the vehicle, for building this future.

It is time to move beyond critique and toward systemic change. A solidarity-based digital economy is not only possible—it is urgently necessary.

Nothing about us without us—especially in the platform economy

Reclaiming the Platform Economy through Social Solidarity

The Social Solidarity Economy offers the compass,
and platform cooperativism the vehicle,
for a just, democratic, and solidarity-based transformation.

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