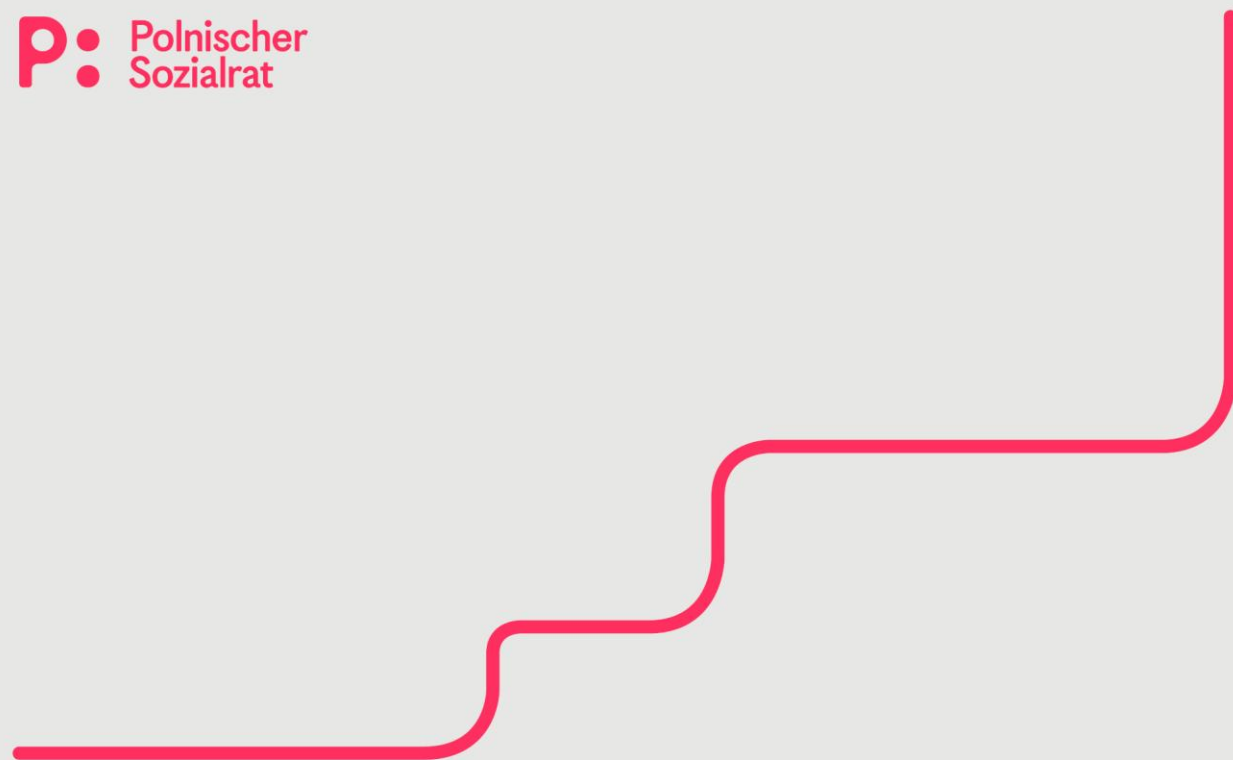




Platform Workers – Barriers to Participation

Issue Paper 01/2026

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On 29 January, the Deutscher Bundestag debated a proposal concerning food delivery platform workers.¹ Delivery riders from the Lieferando Workers Collective were present in the parliamentary audience and were directly addressed by politicians – a visible recognition of a workforce that has spent more than a decade organizing to be heard. This moment reflects sustained efforts by workers, unions, and civil society to empower participation of platform workers, in particular in the food delivery sector.

Platform work is a diverse phenomenon, typically associated with short term arrangements ('gigs') and often linked to insecure or precarious forms of employment. This issue paper examines the significant **structural, legal, and institutional barriers** that shape platform workers' ability to participate in social and democratic processes. It highlights **social obstacles to participation**, noting that some groups remain at heightened risk of exclusion, particularly workers facing language barriers, social isolation, or employment in private households.

Platform work in Germany

Over the past decade, platform work has attracted considerable scholarly attention worldwide and has become a central focus of debates on precarious work. This interest reflects both the rapid expansion of digital labour platforms and the unprecedented scale of worker mobilisations across jurisdictions – despite substantial structural and legal barriers to collective action.

Estimates suggest that around 5.7% of the German workforce engages in platform work,² though no official statistics exist. Platforms do not systematically disclose workforce data, and survey-based estimates are challenging, as many workers participate only occasionally and may not self-identify as platform workers.

Platform work is highly heterogeneous, encompassing different platform models, types of work, and employment arrangements. Survey evidence indicates that roughly three in ten platform workers in Germany perform on-location work, while the majority engage in online, location-independent tasks, mainly writing and translation (23.1%) or professional services (12.1%).³

¹ <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2026/kw05-de-essenslieferdienste-1139772>

² Urzi Brancati, Maria C., Annarosa Pesole, and Enrique Fernández Macías. 2020. New Evidence on Platform Workers in Europe. EUR 29958 EN. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi:10.2760/459278.

³ European Commission, Joint Research Centre. 2023. The Platformisation of Work: Evidence from the JRC Algorithmic Management and Platform Work Survey (AMPWork). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

Key digital labour platforms include:

- **Online work:**
 - Freelancing & Creative Work: Fiverr, Upwork, Freelancer.com.
 - Microtasks / Short Online Jobs: Clickworker, Amazon Mechanical Turk
- **On-location work:**
 - Food and grocery delivery: Lieferando, Wolt, Uber Eats, Flink
 - Ride-hailing: Bolt, Uber
 - Home cleaning: Helpling
 - Childcare: Sitly, Betreut.de
 - Handyman and errands: TaskRabbit, TippTapp

Structural barriers

Platform business models are deliberately structured to limit workers' bargaining power, directly constraining their **participation in the workplace**:

- They attract highly **heterogeneous workforces** – often composed of migrants, international students, and workers whose qualifications are not recognised – by offering fast, low-threshold access to income with minimal formal requirements.
- The **temporary or secondary** nature of much platform work, rather than its provision as a primary long-term income source, contributes to high turnover and workforce mobility.
- The **organisational design of platforms** compounds these constraints. Work is coordinated entirely through apps, often performed in dispersed or private locations, and lacks stable workplaces where employees can meet, exchange information, or coordinate action.

Together, these factors severely limit workers' ability to participate in their digital 'workplace', which helps explain why much of their mobilization and collective action occurs outside the platform.

Legal barriers

Two main legal barriers constrain participation of platform workers – employment and migration status, because they restrict access to individual and collective labour rights, as well as social protections.

Employment status

Employment status in the platform economy is not just a labour issue – it determines whether workers can access rights, representation, and meaningful democratic participation. Platform work in Berlin is split across **direct employment, self-employment, subcontracting, and informal work**. Most of these models create income instability and weaken workers' access to labour and social protections. Employment status thus produces segmentation, which directly affects opportunities for workplace participation and broader democratic engagement.

Direct employment

A small minority of platform workers are directly employed and enjoy relative stability, formal access to labour and social rights, and collective representation. The main example is **Lieferando**, which provides direct employment with standardized pay, fixed shifts, and access to works councils and union support – clear channels for collective representation. However, planned outsourcing to subcontractors threatens to roll back these gains.

Self-employment

Self-employed workers have variable incomes but retain some autonomy and limited social protections. However, they have no access to labour rights and cannot bargain collectively. Self-employment is widespread in online platform work as well as care work. Many workers operate in grey zones between genuine self-employment and informal work, because platforms do not always verify whether a person is properly registered with the authorities. Complex tax and administrative requirements may further discourage registration.

Subcontracted and informal work

Workers engaged through subcontractors or informal arrangements face the highest income insecurity and the weakest access to labour rights, representation, and complaint mechanisms.

- **Subcontracting:** Most food delivery platforms, including **Wolt** and **Uber Eats**, operate through subcontractors, which often fail to provide proper employment contracts. Fragmented accountability makes it difficult for workers to organize collectively or assert their rights.
- **Informal work:** Informal arrangements remain common in several platform sectors, particularly among domestic workers performing cleaning and care work.

This segmentation produces unequal opportunities to claim rights and participate in institutional life, concentrating exclusion among those already in precarious positions.

Migration status

There are no official statistics on the socio-demographic profile of platform workers in Germany. However, qualitative reports suggest that on-location platform work in Berlin often serves as a low-threshold entry point for newly arrived migrants who may not speak German. (Altenried 2021; Altenried et al. 2021; Alyanak et al. 2023). Media coverage of Berlin's delivery sector highlights that many riders are recently arrived migrants – often from South Asia, Syria, or Afghanistan – frequently holding temporary residence or student visas. Research in cleaning and babysitting shows a similar pattern of recent arrivals, whereas elderly care tends to employ more established migrants (Niebler and Animento 2023; Orth 2024).

While public debate often treats migration background as the main source of precarity, it is the **formal migration status** that most strongly shapes workers' position in the platform labour market and their access to rights and participation. Migration status interacts with employment segmentation, channeling workers into more or less protected segments of the platform economy:

- **EU citizens and permanent residents:** These workers enjoy nearly full labour rights and social protections. They are better positioned to access formal contracts and institutional protections, including direct employment with companies such as Lieferando. Those who are more established in Germany and able to navigate administrative systems are also more likely to pursue self-employment, despite its limited protections.

- **Workers with temporary visas, asylum-seeker, or tolerated stay status:** These workers face legal restrictions on employment, limited social protections, and higher vulnerability to exploitation. They are often confined to informal or highly precarious arrangements – for example offered by subcontractors in the food delivery industry.

These formal distinctions, rather than nationality or migrant background, function as a sorting mechanism, thereby reinforcing segmentation in the platform economy. Migration status also shapes **political participation**: only migrants with German citizenship can vote in national and regional elections, EU citizens can vote in European and local (Kommunal) elections but not in Senate elections, and third-country nationals without EU citizenship are excluded from all elections. German political parties generally show little interest in engaging migrants within their ranks, further limiting avenues for political participation.

Institutional barriers

Participation in unions and works councils represents a key institutional form of participation and is technically available to migrant workers.

However, the employment status of the majority of platform workers limits their legal right to engage with these structures. Only a minority of workers with direct employment contracts have full access to collective labour rights. This is the case at Lieferando where employees participate through NGG union membership, works councils, and the more informal Lieferando Workers Collective. Self-employed platform workers generally have the right to join unions, but not to bargain collectively. By contrast, institutional participation among workers on other food delivery platforms (e.g., Wolt and Uber Eats) and in ride-hailing is limited due to the prevalence of subcontracting and informal work arrangements.

In addition to legal constraints, trade unions face internal and structural challenges in adapting to platform work, which further limits their capacity to promote participation:

- **Membership models misaligned with precarious work:** Unions are traditionally organized around stable employment, whereas platform work is temporary and high-turnover.
- **Hierarchical organisational structures:** Decision-making is often concentrated at higher levels, reducing opportunities for direct participation by rank-and-file workers.
- **Perceived gaps in representativeness:** Unions are sometimes viewed as insufficiently reflective of the migrant-dominated platform workforce.

As a result, even when unions are willing to engage with platform workers, their practices are often poorly suited to the fragmented, heterogeneous, and high-turnover nature of platform labour.

Social barriers

Data on the socio-demographic profile of platform workers in Germany is limited, and little is known about how factors such as age, gender, education, or class shape participation. Research suggests several important influences:

- **Gender:** Women often balance work with caregiving responsibilities, limiting time for participation. Gendered pay disparities and discrimination further constrain income opportunities, while sectors such as care work are heavily feminized and performed in private or isolated settings, reducing contact with peers and access to collective support.
- **Education:** Platform workers vary widely in educational attainment. Highly educated workers often treat platform work as temporary, using it as short-term income while pursuing other opportunities, whereas workers with lower education may rely on it as a long-term livelihood, increasing exposure to precarious conditions.
- **Class and economic pressure:** Financial pressures – including debt, high housing costs, and obligations to support family abroad – create urgency to accept insecure work and reduce capacity for collective action or refusal of exploitative conditions.
- **Nationality and community networks:** Some migrant communities, such as those from India or Pakistan, benefit from strong social networks that facilitate information sharing and mutual aid, while others lack such networks, limiting guidance, support, and collective mobilization.
- **Language:** Limited German proficiency restricts access to employment, information, and institutional channels like unions or works councils, while making administrative and legal processes more difficult to navigate.

Social embeddedness, language skills, age, gender, education, and class interact with migration and employment status to shape both access to work and opportunities for participation. Workers with the fewest resources are often concentrated in the least protected segments and least able to participate meaningfully.

Narrative barriers

Platform work has gained public and political visibility, but this focus has largely been on male-dominated sectors such as food delivery and ride-hailing. This attention has highlighted serious gaps in labour protections – short-term contracts, high workforce turnover, persistent insecurity, and reliance on subcontracting and informal labour – even for formally employed workers.

The introduction of “platform work” as a distinct category has also enabled regulatory developments, notably the EU Platform Work Directive (adopted in 2024), though it is still awaiting implementation by Germany (by the end of 2026). While important, this framing may be a blunt instrument for sectors such as care and domestic work, and it underscores barriers that limit the participation of all workers in shaping the public narrative.

Main obstacles to more inclusive narratives:

- **Limited recognition of workforce heterogeneity:** Workers are often categorized in simplified ways, while differences in gender, age, nationality, and employment type are overlooked. This reduces understanding of the full diversity of platform work.
- **Underrepresentation of female-majority sectors:** Sectors such as care and cleaning, where women form the majority, as well as online and domestic work, are frequently excluded from public and policy debates. This reinforces structural inequalities and limits the voices of large groups of workers in shaping reform narratives.
- **Overreliance on the Platform Work Directive:** The Directive introduces rights on employment status, algorithmic transparency, and collective organization. However, expecting it to solve all platform work challenges risks stalling other legislative initiatives and limits attention to sectors where the Directive has little practical effect.
- **Lack of emphasis on the weak enforcement of existing labour laws:** Precarity persists through subcontracting chains that allow lead firms to evade responsibility. Despite existing legal tools, enforcement remains weak, leaving workers structurally excluded from labour and social rights.

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About the Polish Social Council e.V.

The Polish Social Council (Polnischer Sozialrat e.V., PSR) is a migrant led self-help organisation active throughout Germany. In particular, the association brings the perspective of EU citizens into political, expert and public debates. A key focus of the work is on [equal opportunities](#), [labour market integration](#) and [raising awareness for experiences of discrimination](#), including in the context of EU migration, cross-border commuting and anti-Slavism.

About the project: "Kooperationsverbund für Vielfalt und Zusammenhalt"

This brochure was produced as part of the [Kooperationsverbund für Vielfalt und Zusammenhalt – Chancengerechtigkeit in der pluralen Gesellschaft](#) (Cooperation Network for Diversity and Cohesion – Equal Opportunities in a Pluralistic Society). The network aims to systematically incorporate migrant perspectives into [mainstream structures](#), policy debates and social negotiation processes.

The Kooperationsverbund brings together the expertise of migrant organisations, active across Germany, promotes [knowledge transfer](#), [networking](#) and [quality development](#), and strengthens democratic participation and equal opportunities in a diverse society.

<https://vielfalt-und-zusammenhalt.de/>

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