



Democratic participation in the platform economy – the democratic challenge

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The democratic challenge

Platform work challenges not only labour standards, but also democratic participation. Platform workers face structural, legal, and social barriers that limit their access to institutional channels of worker representation, particularly trade unions. As a result, many platform workers – many of whom are recently arrived migrants with limited resources – **lack meaningful access to representation and democratic voice**. Strengthening participation in this context is therefore not only a matter of labour rights, but of democratic inclusion.

In the platform economy, traditional indicators of labour movement success at the workplace – such as building large and stable union membership, organising strikes, and exerting sustained influence over company policy – are difficult to achieve. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, these constraints, platform workers have developed **alternative forms of participation beyond the workplace** – through bottom-up organising, coalition-building with unions and civil society actors, and engagement in public and regulatory debates. While their direct impact on working conditions remains limited, these initiatives generate important organisational, symbolic, and biographical effects and contribute to democratic participation.

Gaps in institutional participation

In Germany, trade unions and works councils are the main institutional channels for workplace participation. In the platform economy, however, access to these mechanisms is constrained by the employment status. Most platform workers are not formally classified as employees and therefore fall outside co-determination and collective bargaining frameworks.¹ While self-employed workers can join unions, they cannot bargain collectively.

In practice, **institutional participation is largely limited to food delivery workers directly employed at Lieferando** who engage through the trade union *Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten* (NGG) or works councils in some cities. Through the *Liefern am Limit* campaign, NGG has supported Lieferando workers in pushing for higher wages (including a €15 minimum), collective agreements, bonus pay for Sundays and public holidays, and improved health and safety standards.

In 2025, NGG intensified its actions through strikes, demonstrations, warning actions, and coordinated protests across multiple cities. The campaign mobilised hundreds of workers across multiple cities, prompted negotiations with the company and generated sustained media visibility. Perhaps most importantly, it helped raise public and political awareness of “shadow fleet” practices (subcontracting in food delivery), contributing to parliamentary debate on direct employment requirements.

However, NGG membership in the sector remains low – only a small fraction of Lieferando workers are NGG members, and workers at Wolt and Uber Eats cannot formally participate due to subcontracting or informal work arrangements. Overall, the NGG case illustrates both the relevance and the limits of union-based representation in the platform economy: while they can generate visibility and exert pressure in specific instances, **trade unions struggle to ensure broad, stable, or inclusive democratic participation across the sector.**

¹ Kocher, Eva, and Joanna Bronowicka. 2024. ‘Kampf Und Offenheit – Wie Muss Eine Gewerkschaft Im Rechtssinne Organisiert Sein?’ *Kritische Justiz* 57(4):504–21. doi:10.5771/0023-4834-2024-4.

Innovative democratic practices

The gap in institutional representation is increasingly being addressed by a diverse set of organisational actors with different goals, structures, and trajectories. What unites them, however, is a shared commitment to developing **new practices enabling broad and inclusive participation, particularly for migrant workers** whose employment or migration status often restricts their formal rights and access to representation.

These initiatives take varied organisational forms, including grassroots unions, worker collectives, NGOs, and informal networks. Despite their organisational differences, they often rely on similar practices, such as open membership, relatively flat hierarchies, and consensus-based decision-making. Although these social structures are often ephemeral, **they have a long-term impact on the workers sense of agency and collective capacity, an on regulatory debates and broader public discourse.**

Examples of innovative democratic practices in the food delivery sector:

FAU Berlin – Deliverunion (2017–2019)

The Freie Arbeiter*innen Union (FAU), an anarcho-syndicalist grassroots union, was the first organisation to systematically organise food delivery riders in Berlin, targeting workers at Foodora, Deliveroo, Lieferando, and Wolt.²

- Mobilized workers across the sector through direct workplace organising, local protests, public awareness actions, and broad network-building rather than formal collective bargaining
- Raised public awareness of precarious working conditions in the food delivery sector.
- Built a cross-platform grassroots network of riders, laying the groundwork for subsequent collective initiatives.

² Ivanova, Mirela, Joanna Bronowicka, Eva Kocher, and Anne Degner. 2018. 'The App as a Boss? Control and Autonomy in Application-Based Management.' Arbeit | Grenze | Fluss. Work in Progress Interdisziplinärer Arbeitsforschung 2. <https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-euv/frontdoor/index/index/docId/388>.

Gorillas Workers Collective and Works Council (2021–2024)

The Gorillas Workers Collective emerged during the boom of food delivery services in the pandemic and mobilized a highly diverse group of migrant workers to protest deteriorating working conditions, playing a central role in public debates on gig work. Over time, these efforts were partially formalized through the establishment of a works council (Betriebsrat); however, these structures no longer exist today, following Gorillas' acquisition by Getir and Getir's subsequent withdrawal from the market.

- Establishing the first migrant-only Works Council in Germany.
- Generated international media attention and became a focal point of public debate during the pandemic.
- Empowered migrant workers through legal knowledge and shaped their future trajectories as labour activists.
- Built networks and coalitions with other activist groups and social movements.
- Inspired similar organising efforts at Flink, Getir, and Wolt, demonstrating cross-platform diffusion.

Lieferando Workers Collective and Works Council (2020–present)

The Lieferando Workers Collective is one of the most durable delivery worker formations in Berlin and has operated in parallel with the company's Works Council structures, with both playing a central role in worker representation and advocacy.

- Has formed the majority within the Works Council at Lieferando Berlin: migrant-led and representative of the diverse workforce, enabling direct engagement with migrant workers.
- The Council expands legal knowledge and supports workers in disputes with the employer. Serves as a practical site for learning how to use works councils as a legal instrument of worker voice in heterogeneous workplaces.
- The Collective coordinates protests, campaigns, and demonstrations over several years.
- The collective maintains open and fluid membership and functions as a key node for labour activism, building coalitions with activist groups, researchers, and unions such as NGG.
- Acts as a visible participant in policy debates and media coverage on platform work regulation.

Examples of Innovative Democratic Practices in the Other Sectors:

YouTubers Union – FairTube (2018–2021)

The FairTube project, initiated by IG Metall in cooperation with the YouTubers Union, sought to organise content creators and improve working conditions on YouTube by addressing the challenges of algorithmically mediated platform work.³

- Established FairTube e.V., a formal association providing creators with a structured vehicle for collective organisation and advocacy.
- Opened high-level dialogue with Google/YouTube on transparency, monetisation rules, and platform governance.
- Pressured YouTube to clarify monetisation policies and improve communication and support channels for creators.
- Demonstrated how established unions can experiment with new forms of representation for self-employed and platform-based workers.

Fair Yoga Initiative (2020–2022)

The Fair Yoga Initiative organised self-employed yoga teachers in Berlin to resist the platformisation of their work and defend professional autonomy in the fitness sector.⁴

- Strengthened collective identity among yoga teachers by creating a forum for shared concerns and mutual support.
- Challenged the treatment of yoga as a generic on-demand service, reinforcing professional standards and autonomy.
- Raised awareness of precarity among self-employed platform workers in the fitness sector.
- Highlighted gaps in legal protections for solo self-employed professionals, contributing to broader debates on labour rights and platform regulation.

³ Niebler, Valentin. 2020. "YouTubers Unite": Collective Action by YouTube Content Creators'. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 26(2):223–27. doi:10.1177/1024258920920810.

⁴ Bronowicka, Joanna. 2024. "Yoga Is Not a Sport": Mobilisation of Self-Employed Yoga Teachers Against Fitness Platforms'. *Labour & Law Issues* 10(2):155–79. doi:10.6092/issn.2421-2695/20897.

Cross-Sector Initiatives

Beyond sector-specific organising, a diverse ecosystem of NGOs, informal migrant networks, and independent media provides a complementary infrastructure that enables democratic participation for precarious platform workers.

- Provide multilingual legal advice and access to labour rights knowledge.
- Support collective action through organising, mutual aid, and mobilisation for demonstrations and campaigns.
- Create avenues for broader civic and workplace participation among precarious and migrant workers.

Key actors include:

- **NGOs:** Arbeit Gestalten; arbeitsunrecht in deutschland; PayDay; Initiative Kämpfender Arbeiter; MiGLAB; BEMA; Faire Mobilität; Arbeit und Leben – Fachstelle Migration und Gute Arbeit.
- **Informal and migrant networks:** Berlin Workers Center, Basta; Berlin Migrant Strikers; Oficina Precaria; GAS; Migrar Berlin; Lager Mobilisation Group; Critical Workers; South Asian mutual aid networks and cultural projects such as Subkontinent.
- **Independent media:** LabourNetTV; podcasts such as *Delivery Charge* and *arbeitsunrecht FM*; Instagram channels including @gerechtearbeit and @berlin_workers_support.

Impacts on democratic participation

These new initiatives have generally had limited impact on working conditions – arguably the primary concern of workers and their representatives. Changes in company policies are rare or highly incremental, and in some sectors of the platform economy, conditions have even worsened. However, they generate a range of other outcomes that are important for democratic participation:

Organisational impact

- Facilitate association of dispersed platform workers, overcoming fragmentation.
- Provide spaces for deliberation, coordination, and direct participation, particularly valuable for migrant workers, who face barriers to traditional political engagement.
- Enhance legal and political literacy, enabling workers to articulate claims and navigate institutions.

Symbolic impact

- Generate media visibility and stimulate public debate on platform work.
- Highlight regulatory gaps and encourage discussion on legislative reform.
- Shift public discourse toward collective rights and corporate accountability.

Biographical impact

- Serve as the first experience of organised participation for many workers.
- Build confidence in engaging authorities and strengthens sense of collective efficacy.
- Can encourage broader civic and political engagement beyond the workplace.

Societal and cross-sector impacts

- Foster coalitions with advocacy groups, migrant organisations, and digital rights activists.
- Reframe poor working conditions as company policy/regulatory outcomes, not technological inevitabilities.
- Contribute to broader debates on labour rights in the digital age.

However, these new initiatives face significant limitations. Many remain **organisationally fragile and short-lived**, often relying on a small number of highly committed activists, volunteer labour, or short-term project funding. They typically **lack a formal legal mandate** to represent workers in collective bargaining or institutional decision-making processes. Moreover, sustaining engagement within highly diverse and fluid memberships can generate internal **coordination difficulties and strategic tensions**.

Conclusion: lessons learned

In sum, the diversity of new organisational forms observed across platform economy reflects – and actively responds to – the rapidly changing environment created by the expansion of digital labour platforms and the persistent gaps in institutional protection. These initiatives emerge where trade unions fall short, adapting to fragmented workplaces, high workforce turnover, and heterogenous migrant workforces.

Participation in such structures often has **lasting individual effects**. Workers report increased confidence, greater legal awareness, and a higher likelihood of engaging in further forms of social and political participation. As a result, platform work has gained an **unusual degree of public visibility compared to many other areas of precarious employment**, with working conditions becoming a recurring focus of media attention and political contestation.

At the same time, these initiatives face **important trade-offs**. In prioritising accessibility and democratic participation, they often relinquish the ambition of building stable, long-term membership organisations. Their structures may be fluid and less durable, yet this flexibility enables engagement under conditions of precarity.

Several lessons emerge:

1. **Low-threshold participation structures are essential** in highly precarious and fragmented sectors.
2. **Migrant-led initiatives foster trust and engagement**, particularly in diverse workforces where formal institutions may lack credibility.
3. **Legal literacy strengthens democratic participation**, equipping workers to navigate disputes and institutional mechanisms such as works councils.
4. **Media visibility amplifies worker voice beyond the workplace**, shaping public discourse and regulatory debates.

Looking forward, supporting these democratic infrastructures requires recognising their distinct logic. **They should not be evaluated solely by traditional union metrics such as stable membership growth or impact on working conditions.** While cooperation with established unions is possible, these new initiatives are sometimes perceived as competitors and **cannot rely exclusively on union backing**. Instead, **they require direct forms of support** that value broader outcomes: building organisational capacity, shaping workers' biographies and civic trajectories, generating public visibility, and enabling meaningful participation in regulatory processes.

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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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