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Reclaiming Wage-Work: Power, Subordination and Contestation among Africa's Precarious Workers

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ABSTRACT

Amidst global labour insecurity and rising unemployment, a growing body of scholarship has called for the decentring of wage-work from the social and political imagination. For some scholars, this has involved a recentring of the study of entrepreneurship; for others, a focus on the possibilities of repeasantisation; still others have argued for the need to shift away from politics at the point of production altogether, and towards redistribution, with universal basic income gaining particular traction. However, as our research illustrates, wage-work has not disappeared; it has become more precarious. In the tradition of the work of Professor Edward Webster, this paper challenges the “end of labour” thesis by exploring what work is actually taking place, how it is being done and what the implications are for building worker power. We draw on three case studies of African workers, namely private security guards in South Africa, domestic workers in Mozambique, and platform workers in Kenya. For each case study, we explore the variegated forms of subordination to capital; the implications for workers’ identities, aspirations and political demands; the emerging structures of representation; and contestations that have emerged in the context of a declining trade union movement. We argue that wage-work continues to be important to workers’ identities and social reproduction, even as working arrangements are restructured through externalisation and the exclusion of whole categories of workers from labour protections.

KEYWORDS

work; precarity; power; capital and agency

Introduction

Ntate Sejako lives with his wife in the township of Thabong, Welkom. He was recruited by the Employment Bureau of Africa in the late 1970s in his twenties to work in the Free State goldfields. For years, he worked as a stope team member at Harmony’s Merriespruit shaft No. 1. Then, in 2010, just shy of retirement, he was retrenched along with 3700 of his colleagues. With his severance package, Ntate Sejako tried to set up a business but was

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ultimately unsuccessful. Today, he runs a second-hand informal clothing stall with his wife. When he has spare time, he drops by the factories in the Welkom Industrial Area to see if they have any work vacancies. But with few formal qualifications and no fancy CV, he has struggled to secure employment. Penniless, he sees his retrenchment as a tragic event, one which has undermined his ability to fulfil the social expectations of a male head of household. In a last-ditch effort, he and 14 other former mineworkers formed a solidarity group to demand that they be reinstated, or at the very least, that the company employ their unemployed sons.

The transition to independence and the end of white minority rule across the African continent brought with it great expectations of industrial convergence and improved conditions of work (Arrighi, Silver, and Brewer 2003; Pons-Vignon and Anseeuw 2009). Instead, many countries are facing the spectre of premature deindustrialisation, amid global restructuring, financialisation and technological innovation (Newman 2017; Rodrik 2016; Sefalafala, Castel-Branco, and Malabela 2023). As workers become increasingly surplus to the accumulation needs of capital, a crisis of reproduction has taken root, characterised by rising unemployment, working poverty and inequality (Scully 2013). Today, South Africa has an expanded unemployment rate of 42.6 per cent, and three-quarters of the unemployed have been unemployed for longer than a year (Stats SA 2024). While the problem of unemployment appears less severe in neighbouring countries, its true extent is difficult to discern because a significant proportion of the population are considered to be “employed” as peasant farmers, regardless of whether they are able to meet their basic needs or not (Castel-Branco 2021a).

In response to this deepening crisis of reproduction, some scholars have called for the need to decentre wage-work from the social and political imagination (Ferguson and Li 2018; Gorz 1999; Weeks 2011). After all, what is wage-work under capitalism anyway, if not a source of alienation? However, for Ntate Sejako, the alienation of exploitation pales in comparison to the material, psychological and social alienation as an unemployed man (Sefalafala 2024). Far from the hustlers depicted by Thieme (2018) and others, he sees the work of hustling as a symptom of social death rather than a strategy of resistance against it. Barchiesi (2011) explains this persistent attachment to wage-work—even when decent wage-work is increasingly hard to come by—as a nostalgic evocation of a social order in which gendered norms of authority and deference are structured around the ability to earn a wage. While these norms may be slowly changing among younger generations (Dawson 2021), Ntate Sejako maintains that unemployment remains a key source of tension in household relations: “I see mostly the young couples break up once the man is unemployed My wife is supportive, she has not left me.”

However, the story of Ntate Sejako points to another reason for the continued centrality of wage-work in the social and political imagination: alternative sources of livelihood have simply not been able to sustain the material basis of social life and the gendered obligations of personhood. Decentring wage-work effectively requires a revolution in the organisation of production, distribution and redistribution. However, much of the post-work scholarship has centred on reformist utopias, such as universal basic income (Ackerman et al. 2006; Olin Wright 2010; Standing 2017)—which abstracts from the very processes of accumulation that have made people surplus in the first place. This brand of utopia without class politics, to borrow from Burawoy (2020), is limiting precisely

because the process of making people surplus is neither linear nor predetermined. Indeed, as Silver (2003) has shown, throughout history, working classes have been made, unmade and remade in response to changes in the organisation of production, the labour process and worker struggle. This was a view shared by the late Edward (Eddie) Webster, who was more interested in understanding where struggles *were* taking place, rather than where they were not.

In his later work, Eddie Webster was particularly focused on how to strengthen the collective power of worker organisation in the formal and informal sectors. In his final book, *Recasting Workers' Power: Work and Inequality in the Shadow of the Digital Age* (Webster and Dor 2023), he profiled the struggles of African workers across a range of sectors—schoolteachers, municipal workers, manufacturing workers, delivery drivers, street traders—in an effort to understand how working-class movements were taking shape in response to changes in the organisation of production and the labour process. Inspired by the “Websterian tradition,” this paper examines the changing nature of workplace politics in three industries across three African countries: private security guards in South Africa, domestic workers in Mozambique and platform workers in Kenya. For each case study, we compare the variegated forms of subordination to capital; the implications for workers’ identities, aspirations and political demands; the emerging structures of representation and the possibilities for reshaping the conditions of work and social reproduction. The research was conducted by the authors between 2016 and 2022, and included participant observation, semi-structured interviews and life histories.

Revisiting the “Websterian” tradition

The phrase “Websterian” was first coined by Mbuyiseni Ndlozi to describe Webster’s intellectual influence on global labour studies and the South African labour movement (Ndlozi 2010). For the purposes of this paper, we discuss three key tenets of the Websterian tradition. The first tenet is the continued centrality of wage-work in defining social relations. Webster was particularly interested in the relationship between technological innovation, the labour process and emerging forms of worker organisation. In his first major work, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (1985), he explored how the introduction of automating technologies had transformed the work process, fragmenting existing power relations and creating new forms of worker organisation. In contrast to Braverman’s (1998) linear analysis of the labour process under industrial capitalism, Webster argued that the outcome of technological innovation was far more contingent. Of course, the subsequent decline of trade unionism in South Africa and around the world raised difficult questions about the future of labour (Castells 1999). However, Webster maintained that while deindustrialisation, externalisation and casualisation had undermined the power of trade unions, these processes had certainly not resulted in the end of work or workers.

Almost 40 years later, in *Recasting Workers' Power* (Webster and Dor 2023), Webster returned to this line of argumentation, this time extending his gaze beyond South Africa’s manufacturing sector to service workers across the African continent. He drew heavily on the power resources approach (PRA), which he saw as a heuristic device to analyse what workers *could* do to strengthen their bargaining position vis-à-vis capital (Castel-Branco, Mutoro, and Webster 2023). The PRA focused on four aspects of worker

power: structural power, which stemmed from labour's position in the production process; associational power, which emerged from workers' collective organisation; institutional power, which was based on the regulatory regime governing labour relations; and societal power, which involved forging alliances with organisations outside the establish labour movement (Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster 2018). Webster's key insight was that even if transformations in the world of work had undermined workers' structural power, there were other sources of power which could be leveraged to enhance their bargaining position. However, as Bieler (2018) noted, "even a focus on agency still requires an awareness of the structuring conditions within which agency takes place, if we want to comprehend the possibilities of successful resistance" (243).

The second tenet of the Websterian tradition is the importance of the collective power of workers. At his inaugural lecture in 1991, Webster presented an agenda-setting paper titled *Taking Labour Seriously: Sociology and Labour in South Africa* (Webster 1991), where he argued that the labour movement was a central force for social change and that sociology had an important role to play in building the South African labour movement. Underlying his sense of the centrality of the labour movement was his belief that wage-work was the central dynamic of modern industrial society and workers a critical political force. For Webster, organised labour was the only vehicle capable of advancing an incremental strategy of radical reform, that would not only result in the transformation of the workplace, but of society itself. Therefore, it was essential to understand workers' contested identities and dynamic practices of power; to engage with popular struggles and to contribute to them. Webster challenged the tendency within Marxist political economy, to overdetermine the power of capital and overlook the agency of workers. According to Webster, "radical reform" was

radical in its vision of an alternative to present society but "reformist" in its strategic use of power. In its emphasis on gradualism, flexibility and compromise with employers and the state, the labour movement is the clearest example of the strategy of radical reform. (Webster 1998, 14)

Sceptical of the statist experiments with socialism, Webster saw "radical reform" as a strategy through which trade unions could advance a "radical version of social democracy" through institutional means.

However, as the labour movement went into decline, the possibilities of radical reform began to look increasingly bleak. Indeed, some scholars went so far as to declare "the end of labour" (Castells 1999). Nevertheless, Webster continued his search for emerging forms of worker struggle, both inside and outside the labour movement. In *Recasting Workers' Power*, Webster and Dor (2023) traced how African workers across a range of sectors had formed hybrid workplace structures ranging from workers' centres to cooperatives, to associations, to trade unions. One of his foci of research was the platform economy. In collaboration with Fikile Masikane, Webster explored how food couriers had appropriated the very technologies used by management to exercise labour control, to strengthen their bargaining position (Webster and Masikane 2023). In Ghana, Kenya and South Africa, food couriers leveraged digital technologies to organise WhatsApp groups, mutual aid organisations, credit and savings cooperatives, associations and even industrial action. In his work with Carmen Ludwig, Webster explored how some trade unions had successfully managed to incorporate associations into their institutions.

Drawing on the case of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union in Uganda, they argued that if unions were to effectively reassert themselves as a counter-hegemonic force, they would have to transform their structures, strategies and tactics—and do so on a global scale.

Despite his commitment to strengthening the collective power of workers, Webster did not shy away from criticism of organised labour. The transition to democracy in South Africa, he argued, had led to growing individualism, increased competition for resources, the centralisation of decision making, the neglect of workplace organising, and an over-reliance on institutional power. These changes undermined trade unions' associational and structural power, ultimately reproducing a dualised apartheid labour regime. To be sure, there were some veiled attempts by the Congress of South African Trade Unions to engage with the growing mass of informal(ised) workers. But these initiatives were short-lived due to a lack of interest among the leadership. Dualisation, Webster argued, was detrimental not only to casual workers but also to the sustainability of those at the core. Indeed, as casualisation became increasingly widespread, there was little difference in the position of casual versus permanent workers within the labour process. In fact, in some instances, casualised workers possessed more specialised skills and thus wielded greater structural power to transform their conditions of work and social reproduction. Ultimately, Webster and Dor (2023) argued, "Labour has a future, but not in its current form. These embryonic organisations point in the direction of labour's future, but point is all they do" (159). Here, they concluded, South Africa had much to learn from its African neighbours.

A third tenet of the Websterian approach was his commitment to critical engagement between academia and workers' organisations. As a white academic who grew up under apartheid, his research with black workers' organisations offered him valuable insights about the lives and struggles of black people—in and outside of the workplace—experiences he might not have otherwise encountered. But Webster did not just research workers; he was committed to building working-class organisations. He conducted research to support workers' campaigns, contributed to strengthening their capacity to generate research, and created pathways for trade unionists to pursue a university education through the Global Labour University—all while challenging South African exceptionalism and developing collaborations with movements and scholars across the globe. For Webster, critical engagement ultimately required mutual accountability between researchers and workers; it required of the researcher that they be committed to the broader goals of the labour movement, and it required of the worker a commitment to generating accurate data and reflecting on their positionality in the process. While Webster sought to conscientise workers, the very act of conscientisation conscientised him.

Recasting Workers' Power was launched at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies in 2023, just months before Webster's passing. To mark the occasion, he organised a day-long workshop titled "The Present as History." In a characteristic effort to bridge the gap between trade unions and academia, he pulled together an intergenerational group of scholars and activists, who were tasked with reflecting on the future of work, the agents of social transformation and the possibilities for (re)building a labour movement in the twenty-first century. Just months later, the same crowd gathered at his

Table 1. Overview of workers' sources of subordination, identities and organisation.

	Sources of subordination	Identities	Organisation	Demands	Primary target
Platform work	Multinational corporations	Self-employed	Welfare groups, associations, cooperatives, unions	Rates and commissions, safe spaces, due process	State, through regulation and enforcement; company thru enforcement
Security guards	Multinational and domestic corporations	Worker (public sphere)	Welfare groups, legal service providers, unions	Wages, leave, social safe spaces, due process	Company, through enforcement
Domestic work	Individual employer	Worker (domestic sphere)	Welfare groups, legal service providers, unions	Wages, leave, social security, safe spaces, due process	Employer, through enforcement
Street vendor	Subsumption, through consumption, sales and taxes	Unemployed	Welfare groups, associations	Access to credit, safe spaces, social security, employment	State, through public services and job creation

Source: authors' typology, based on case studies.

funeral, where four food couriers bore his coffin to its final resting place. During the memorial service, one leader described his first meeting with Webster and Masikane:

It was a Saturday, and we were playing football, when this old white man arrived. At first, I thought we had found a sponsor for our team. The next week, he pitched up again, this time with a bag of oranges. Eventually, he invited us to a meeting to discuss our problems and strategise how to respond. He convinced us to start an association, and then we went on strike. Imagine, this white old man convinced us to strike against Uber.

Eddie's legacy will remain contested for years to come. Inspired by the "Websterian tradition," the following section examines the changing nature of workplace politics in three industries across three African countries: private security guards in South Africa, domestic workers in Mozambique and platform workers in Kenya. For each case study, we compare the variegated forms of subordination; the implications for workers' identities, aspirations and political demands; the emerging structures of representation and the possibilities for reshaping the conditions of work and social reproduction. In doing so, we reflect on the experience of Ntate Sejako, who, despite identifying as unemployed, is technically a street trader. Through his extensive research on the working lives of black workers over five decades, Webster came to understand the continued desire for wage-work among the unemployed. Wage labour, he argued, had both economic and social multipliers such as improved household relations, access to healthcare and education, less exposure to crime and improved public safety, and social cohesion. The extra-economic benefits also included "useful production, as well as recognition for doing something worthwhile" (Webster 2010, 237) (Table 1).

Private security guards in South Africa

The private security industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors in South Africa's post-apartheid labour market. Its growth reflects growing concerns about the lack of safety and declining confidence in the state's capacity to provide adequate protection from crime

(Louw 1997). The proliferation of the private security industry is a global phenomenon (Heidensohn 1989, cited in Holmqvist 2005), with growth particularly striking in transitional countries like South Africa, where people feel unsafe and are willing to pay for private policing (De Waard 1999; Shearing and Kempa 2000; Van der Spuy 2000). Across South Africa, homes and businesses have the ubiquitous “armed response signs” posted on their walls reflecting “a collective paranoia about security” (Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell 2002, 175). More recently, there has been an increased uptake in personal bodyguard services. More recently, there has been an increased uptake in personal body guard services. Registered businesses providing body guard services constitute 6% of the private security industry. This reflects increased demand for protection for “multiracial elites” in South Africa (PSIRA 2023). Many commentators have observed that the growth of the private security industry in South African must be understood within the context of the race and class inequalities and rising rates of crime in the country.

Critics argue that the privatisation of security is designed to protect the rich from the poor, perpetuating old divisions or extending divisions within societies along class lines. Indeed, commentators describe the creation of these enclaves as a form of neo-apartheid or neo-feudalism (Shearing and Kempa 2000, 207). But the private security industry is also an important source of employment. According to the Private Security Regulatory Authority, there are over 16,453 registered and active private security companies and over 2.8 million registered security guards in the country. Of these, about 15,000 companies employing over 608,977 workers in the private security industry (PSIRA 2024). In contrast, the South African Police Force employs 179,502 police officers, which corresponds to less than a third of active private security guards (SAPS 2024).

Since 2001, labour conditions in the private security industry were regulated by Sectoral Determination 6. Sectoral determinations were introduced following the democratic dispensation, to regulate the conditions of work in vulnerable or unorganised sectors, that were not covered by the emerging bargaining council structure. These included agricultural work, domestic work, retail and hospitality workers, and, of course, private security guards. The sectoral determination sets out the conditions of employment—such as the ordinary hours of work, paid leave, acceptable deductions and disciplinary processes—and defines the scope of activities. Hourly wage rates vary by region, the nature of the work and the grade of worker. The 2006 private strike was an important moment for industry as attention was drawn to the working conditions and the need for a greater degree of regulation in the industry, especially the sectoral determination and the collective bargaining model (Makgetla 2006). With the introduction of the national minimum wage in 2018, the hourly wage rate could not be lower than the level stipulated by the national minimum wage (PSIRA 2024).

In 2018, a bargaining council was established for the private security sector, replacing the Sectoral determination as the regulation for employment conditions. The sector is now regulated by the National Bargaining Council for the Private Security Sector (NBCPSS) and an extended main collective agreement of 2023 that regulates conditions of employment for all employers and trade unions in the sector. The agreement includes employer representatives such as the Security Association of South Africa (SASA), the South African National Security Employers Association (SANSEA) and the Consolidated Employer’s Organisation (CEO), and eight trade unions, including the South African

Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) and Abanqobi Worker's Union (AWU), among others.

Security guards are categorised through a grading system based on responsibilities, experience and training. Security guards in the lowest grade (E), for instance, are responsible for protecting premises or goods, and handling and controlling dogs. Security guards in the highest grade (A) are responsible for advising on security-related matters, supervising subordinate staff, drawing money and driving motor vehicles (SASSETA 2024). The training of security personnel is provided by the Safety and Security Sector Education and Training Authority, which issues a variety of qualifications including certificates for the different grades (SASSETA 2024). The Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA), established by the Security Industry Regulatory Authority Act 56 of 2001, is responsible for overseeing the sector and undertaking inspections to ensure compliance with the regulations (PSIRA 2024; Makgetla 2006). Companies that fail to comply with the regulations run the risk of being de-registered, depending on the severity of the offence.

Although the private security industry is tightly regulated, non-compliance is widespread, resulting in poor working conditions across the sector (Sampaio de Carvalho 2007). Many private security companies have two layers of employees, consisting of registered and unregistered security guards. Registered security guards are generally South Africans who are registered with PSIRA and have access to minimum standards of employment. Unregistered security guards consist of foreign nationals, some undocumented, who are usually not registered with PSIRA and lack access to minimum standards of employment. The most common forms of non-compliance include paying workers below the minimum wage, not paying the necessary overtime for work on nights, weekends and public holidays, forcing workers to pay for their own uniforms and other personal protective equipment, and deducting money from their salaries for social security and health service and then pocketing it. Bifurcated employment practices by private security companies are driven by the need to maximise profits. While it is difficult to determine how widespread these practices are, as they are hidden, PSIRA has been improving its enforcement to eradicate such illegal practices by employers. The insecure conditions of work, low wages, long working hours, few benefits, and exposure to danger mean that security is considered a low-status occupation and security guards often feel stigmatised (Sefalafala and Webster 2013).

Working in the patience industry: domestic workers in Mozambique

Paid domestic work is one of the most important sources of salaried employment for women in urban Mozambique (INE 2021). However, as Ally (2009) points, domestic work poses a paradox for feminist scholars. On the one hand, it has facilitated women's entry into the labour market by reducing the burden of care for some and creating employment opportunities for others. This is particularly important because the growing feminisation of the labour market has not been accompanied by the socialisation of care or the transformation of gender relations (Castel-Branco 2021b). On the other hand, women's incorporation into the labour market through domestic work has been largely adverse. In Mozambique, paid domestic work is characterised by low wages, labour insecurity, long working days, unhealthy working conditions, vulnerability to

abuse, and the need for a large amount of patience. In fact, it has been dubbed the “patience industry” by domestic workers themselves (Castel-Branco 2013).

In 2008, Mozambique’s National Assembly approved Decree 40/2008, finally extending labour protections to domestic workers (Castel-Branco 2012). The trade union federation hailed the regulation as a step towards formalisation. However, in contrast to the standard labour regime for formal sector workers, the regulation did not define a minimum wage. The prevailing position, even within union federation, was that the institution of minimum wage for domestic workers would create a dual employment and care crisis, because minimum-wage workers also employ domestic workers. In addition, the regulation stipulated a longer working day and shorter periods of leave, transferred responsibility for health and social security entirely onto the worker, and undermined worker’s access to complaint mechanisms and due process. According to one member of the domestic workers’ union, the regulation’s unfavourable conditions reflected the union federation’s own contradictory class position. After all, the representatives of the union federation in the tripartite Labour Consultative Commission were also employers of domestic workers and had much more in common with the representatives of the state and business than with the domestic workers they claimed to represent: “At several moments, our colleagues [in the union federation] had to be reminded that they were fighting in the interests of domestic workers” (Castel-Branco 2017, 119, our translation).

More than a decade later, Decree 40/2008 has not transformed the conditions of work in this historically marginalised sector (Castel-Branco 2021b). This is not entirely surprising. On the one hand, the regulation is inadequate. On the other hand, as numerous scholars have pointed out, paid domestic work is a notoriously difficult sector to regulate. After all, domestic work takes place in isolation, behind the closed doors and high walls of private homes, and away from the eyes of inspectors (Hansen 1990). It consists of intimate tasks, which add a personal element to the employment relationship, while inspiring levels of rigidity to ensure that workers do not conflate physical intimacy with social proximity (Constable 2007). Employers may invoke the idea of domestic workers as one of the family—to make their proximity more palpable—but when and how to do so is solely at the employer’s discretion (Qayum and Ray 2010). Ultimately, the fact that domestic work is considered an extension of women’s unpaid care work means that it is often treated as something other than employment and thus deserving of less pay. And because of the asymmetries of power, the nexus between worker and employer is profoundly racialised (Boris and Parreñas 2010).

Although paid domestic work has a racialised history, most employers today are black Mozambicans and class has become the primary source of differentiation (Chipenembe 2010). As in South Africa (Ally 2009), the majority refer to domestic workers as “aunties,” evoking a sense of familiarity and patronage, which obscures the nature of the employment relation, while at the same time performing respect. Others are more inclined to refer to domestic workers as “secretaries,” evoking an image of skill and professionalisation, without eschewing the intimacy required. And yet, upper-class employers in particular deploy racialised ways of being, to enforce asymmetries of power between workers and employers. While domestic workers in upper class neighbourhoods often earn more than workers in the manufacturing and retail sector, many of the discriminatory practices of the colonial period remain, such as forcing domestic workers to use

different dishes and cutlery than the rest of the family. “She’s a racist, she’s black but racist,” as Fernanda notes:

She wouldn’t allow me to drink water from her cup, to hold her spoon, to sit in the seat where she sits ... You had to take off your shoes and hide them far away from her. She would say, “I don’t want your street shoes in my house. I don’t want your street clothes in my house, because they have bacteria.” What’s the difference? I touch her food and turn it into a meal, and she eats it. (Castel-Branco 2012, 42)

Despite its limits, Decree 40/2008 did galvanise domestic worker organising. Two years before the adoption of the regulation, members of the Women’s National Committee of the Organisation of Mozambican Workers began to organise domestic workers in anticipation of negotiations. But the federation was ambivalent about organising domestic workers. “It would have been easier if it were three or four companies,” a union leader recalls. “But imagine organising domestic workers flat by flat in all these buildings in Maputo.” After much tussling, the domestic workers decided to affiliate with the rival National Council of Independent and Free Unions of Mozambique. However, unbeknownst to them, another group of domestic workers and street traders had registered the National Union for Domestic Workers (SINED). SINED started with only a handful of members, who attended the Sol do Mundo church in the suburb of *Urbanização*. But a decade later, they had become one of the largest domestic workers’ union in the world, with over 12,000 members across the country (Castel-Branco and Acciari 2021).

SINED’s leadership credits their success to several factors. The first is the democratic culture of the union, which promotes active participation and collective decision-making. Because the union leadership is not professionalised and leaders continue to work as domestic workers, they had to develop collaborative structures to get the work done. They have a phone tree, which enables union members to communicate with each other. Each member is expected to recruit one new member during mobilisation drives. And the union holds regular meetings, both in neighbourhoods and in the offices of the federation. The second factor is their relationship to community structures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the union partnered with ward councillors to provide support to domestic workers living in working-class neighbourhoods. Ward councillors effectively became union organisers, for they saw in the union a way of addressing the problems in their community. The union also has linkages with feminist groups like Forum Mulher and legal aid organisations like the Association of Women, Law and Development, which provide social and legal support. The third factor in their success has been their affiliation with the International Domestic Workers’ Federation, which has raised the profile of the union within the labour federation and domestic feminist constellations, exposed them to different ways of doing things and provided them with the organisational, technical and financial support to be able to experiment with new organising strategies (Castel-Branco 2021a, 2021b; Castel-Branco and Acciari 2021).

However, the most important factor for SINED’s success is that they have had a meaningful impact on their members’ lives. Impact, their leaders argue, is not only about improvements in wage rates or ensuring compliance with the new regulation; it is also about transforming social relations. Every Saturday, the union meeting starts with a song, often accompanied by theatre. Song allows domestic workers to express their trauma and frustration, to make fun of employers and reverse roles of domination, to

offer advice and supportive words, to begin to heal. Song and theatre are often followed by sessions of training and political education. If workers need additional support, they can stay behind to speak to union leaders. Among the services provided by the union: “know your rights” training in the neighbourhood, mediation and conciliation with employers, representation at the Commission for Labour Mediation and Arbitration, and liaison with the National Institute for Social Security. Ultimately, as a SINED leader points out, “Maintaining a constant presence is very important. It’s not only about recruiting members. It’s also about helping domestic workers navigate problems at work. This establishes confidence in the union.”

Despite its success in building organisation, SINED has struggled to transform conditions in this sector. The lack of employment opportunities means that workers are reluctant to negotiate working conditions, preferring to accept whatever they can get and leave if they find a better opportunity. Ultimately, the inadequate regulation of domestic work undermines worker power. And although domestic workers have been able to build a successful organisation, they remain marginal within the broader landscape of labour organisations. On the one hand, sexism within the trade union movement has rendered domestic concerns secondary; on the other, classism within the feminist movement means that domestic workers are often treated as less worthy of dignified work. Nevertheless, the union leaders are hopeful. Today, domestic workers are legally recognised as workers, there is growing awareness about the value of their work and there is some recognition of the need to improve working conditions.

The platform economy: e-hailing drivers in Kenya

Over the last decade, there has been a proliferation of digital labour platforms across the globe, enabled by new technologies. There are two types of digital labour platforms: online web-based platforms, which mediate remote tasks like editing and translation services; and location-based platforms, which mediate tasks carried out in person, such as driving or domestic work. Fairwork (2021) estimates that there are approximately 100,000 platform workers in Kenya, with e-hailing dominating the sector. In 2014, Uber entered the Kenyan market, disrupting the taxi industry. In 2016, Bolt joined Uber, driving a race to the bottom, and the two companies tried to outcompete each other. Today, there are approximately 23 e-hailing platforms, three-quarters of which are registered in Kenya. However, the “black and green” continue to dominate the market due to their powerful platforms, promotional discounts and localisation strategy (Omolo 2022).

When e-hailing companies first entered the Kenyan market, they were considered footloose tech intermediaries rather than transportation service providers, which enabled them to skirt national regulations governing the transport sector. In addition, they argued that platform workers were independent contractors, which absolved the company from having to comply with labour and social protections and offset the operational costs onto workers. Despite defining workers as independent contractors, e-hailing platforms exerted high levels of labour discipline using algorithmic management. The platform effectively replaced the “middleman” by assigning tasks, determining rates, evaluating performance, rewarding or penalising drivers, and mediating complaints. Platform workers met none of the conditions for self-employment: they did not own the means of production, they had no autonomy over the labour process, they were

economically dependent on the app, and they produced value for the app on a regular basis. By misclassifying platform workers as dependent contractors, companies were able to shift the operational risks entirely onto workers.

For Webster (2020), the platform business model is perhaps the purest form of scientific management, as envisioned by Frederick Taylor (1911). Through digital technologies—such as ratings systems and algorithmic management—platforms have been able to exercise unprecedented levels of control over the labour process without the need for direct human supervision. And it is precisely the absence of direct human supervision which has enabled platform companies to benefit from the cost advantages of informality. Initially, Uber and Bolt offered favourable terms to attract drivers onto the platform. However, once taxi drivers were locked into the technology, companies started to exert downward pressure on working conditions by reducing the rate per kilometre, introducing promotional discounts, increasing commissions and service fees, penalising workers who refused to accept rides, and unilaterally suspending workers from the platform, without due process. Amidst the rising cost of living, drivers work long hours on multiple apps just to make ends meet. According to Omolo (2022), women work an average of 13.2 h a day in comparison to men who work an average of 12.6 h. Tired drivers are especially vulnerable to accidents, crime and harassment, with women drivers in particular prone to sexual abuse. While drivers engage in everyday forms of resistance, such as renegotiating rates, cancelling unprofitable rides and driving offline, they are ultimately subject to the unilateral control of the app.

In 2022, the Kenyan government adopted the National Transport and Safety Authority Regulations. This was prompted by the intensification of platform worker protest and the desire by political figures to position themselves as representatives of working people ahead of the national elections. The regulation defines the relationship between platform network companies, owners, drivers, and passengers. Although it does not establish an employment relationship—indeed, it reinforces the notion that drivers are independent contractors—it does include several stipulations in response to drivers' demands. These include a commissions cap of 18 per cent of drivers' total earnings, a recognition of the need for occupational health and safety standards, due process in the case of suspension or deactivation, and data protections. In a last-ditch effort to prevent the implementation of the regulation, Uber took the Kenyan government to court. It argued that the regulation was unconstitutional, discriminatory and did not involve adequate public participation (Njanja 2022). Despite attempts to forge alliances with customers, car owners and immigrant drivers—the regulations exclude drivers without a Kenyan Personal Identification Number—Uber's bid was unsuccessful, and the regulation went into effect in October of the same year.

For the Digital Taxi Association of Kenya, the adoption of the regulation represented the culmination of years of protest and political mobilisation. However, they soon discovered that the decision to classify workers as independent contractors was ultimately a victory for platform companies, for it shifted the costs, responsibilities, and risks entirely onto workers. Although the National Transport and Safety Authority has enforced the regulation—suspending non-compliant companies and ordering them to pay fines—the regulation has not transformed the conditions of work. In a recent survey of platform workers in Mombasa and Nairobi, conducted by the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, workers complained about low and irregular incomes, high commissions and promotional

discounts, long working hours, harassment and crime, ratings and surveillance. As one association leader says: “There’s a misconception that we are our own bosses ... So, we didn’t fight to be recognised as workers. If we would do it again, that would be the first thing we would do” (cited in Castel-Branco, Mutoro, and Webster 2023, 254).

Importantly, workers in the e-hailing sector do have some degree of structural power. After all, if all drivers logged off the app, they would be able to disrupt the circulation of goods and services. In addition, platform workers are organised through myriads of structures including zones, which demarcate the geographic area in which they operate; *chamas*, which provide mutual aid; savings and credit cooperatives, which offer credit facilities and a share in future ventures; and associations, which engage primarily in advocacy campaigns. However, in a context where only 17 per cent of Kenyans are salaried workers, platforms are flooded with drivers and drivers are heavily indebted, platform workers’ organisations lack the associational power necessary to engage in contentious politics for a long enough period in order to exact concessions from platforms. As the head of one worker association said:

The problem is that we don’t have a whip. Therefore, we can’t do anything collectively. Because we own our own cars, we think individually. Faced with hunger, we choose to feed our families rather than attend an agitation meeting. We can wage industrial action but when it comes to negotiation, that’s where the push and pull begins.

In an effort to strengthen their associational power, workers’ groups approached the Transport Workers’ Union. After all, trade unions have a recognised role in social dialogue processes, can engage in collective bargaining and call for strike action, and are part of global federations. Initially, the union was reluctant to organise platform workers because they did not fit neatly within the established labour regime, they had potentially conflicting priorities, and there was no clear mechanism to exact dues. However, they ultimately conceded, reformed their constitution and adopted a hybrid organising strategy, hopeful that the move would help to revitalise the trade union. This hybrid organising strategy allows platform workers to affiliate with the trade union either as individuals or through an existing association. However, formalising the relationship between the trade union and self-organised groups has not been straightforward. After all, the latter see themselves as autonomous institutions, with their own networks of power and patronage. And indeed, most platform workers surveyed would prefer to bargain directly with platform companies—or through the National Transport and Safety Authority—rather than through the union.

While the regulation has not transformed the conditions of work, it provides a potential avenue through which to regulate platform work and extend labour and social protections to platform workers. In a 2023 survey conducted by the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies with platform workers in Mombasa and Nairobi, 82 per cent of men and 91 per cent of women said that they would support their reclassification as workers, in order to be able to make employment-based claims on the company. While most also favoured the establishment of a minimum rate, they insisted that this should be decided through a collective bargaining process. In the absence of income guarantees, most drivers opposed the imposition of a maximum number of working hours, because the money is not enough. Overall, workers were ambivalent about the sustainability of the e-hailing business model. Some argued that it was simply “monkey business” and that

they would happily change economic activity given the opportunity. A few appreciated the flexibility and hoped that conditions would improve over time. But for many, e-hailing was the only thing that kept them busy. Ultimately, while worker organisation can certainly have an impact on the conditions of work, their ability to transform the structuring conditions of work hinges on conjunctural factors that extend beyond the scope of worker organisation.

Back to the future: taking labour seriously

Debates about the social and political meaning of wage-work are as old as capitalism itself. Throughout history, working classes have been made, unmade and remade in response to transformations in the organisation of production and the agency of workers (Silver 2003). As Eddie Webster's legacy reminds us, "taking labour seriously" involves paying attention to where struggles *are* unfolding—rather than where they are not. When Webster first wrote about the enduring importance of wage-work, the global economy was undergoing profound transformations driven by fall of the Soviet Union and incorporation of former socialist economies into the capitalist world system; the growing participation of women in the labour market, challenging the figure of the "labouring man"; and rising labour insecurity with neoliberal restructuring, outsourcing and casualisation (Standing 1999).

Three decades later, we face another major inflection point, shaped by financialisation, digitalisation and automation. As a growing share of the global population is seemingly rendered surplus to the accumulation needs of capital, some have questioned whether wage-work should remain central to our social and political imaginary (Ferguson and Li 2018). Yet, as this paper has shown, wage-work is more than simply a means of survival—it is a space where identities are constructed, social relations negotiated and political struggles consolidated. To be sure, amidst rising labour insecurity, some have rejected the indignity of wage-work, turning instead to other forms of life making (Dawson 2021). However, as this paper shows—through the cases of private security guards in South Africa, domestic workers in Mozambique and platform workers in Kenya—precarious workers continue to assert claims on wage-work even under conditions of labour insecurity. These workers are not rejecting labour; they are struggling to reclaim it on their own terms. Across the continent, workers have forged new forms of organisation and collective action, often beyond the boundaries of traditional labour institutions. To challenge the "end of labour" thesis, as Webster urged, is not to deny the crisis of wage-work, but to refuse to surrender the dignity of labour to capital's quest for unfettered accumulation. It is to insist that labour, in all its evolving forms, remains a vital terrain of social struggle and political possibility.

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