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The human price of dynamic pay

11 workers explain the impact that new platform wage methods have had on their work and home lives

Foreword

The empirical material for this report was provided by Worker Info Exchange, Stichting WIE International and David Dahill, Nadia Kougiannou and Tom Vickers from the Work Futures Observatory at Nottingham Trent University.

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Summary

Platform operators are now using dynamic pay to boost their profits and exert greater power over workers.

This means that different workers may be offered different rates for the same job, determined by an algorithm whose operation is a mystery to those subject to it.

Workers, for their part, can no longer accurately predict what they will earn when they head out for a shift.

The prospect of collective bargaining between unions and employers, still limited in the UK platform economy, is undermined because there is not a wage rate to negotiate over.

The case studies in this report shows the human side of this development including the effect of workers' stress levels and the toll it takes on family life.

They make a compelling case for swift government action to put the legal protections in place to ensure that platform work is dignified work.

This report therefore argues for action in three linked areas: ending dynamic pay-setting, urgent reform of employment status, and collective data rights that enable effective transparency and bargaining.

Introduction: Dynamic pay as a new wage-setting regime

Dynamic pay now sits at the centre of platform work in the UK, yet it remains one of the least understood transformations in modern labour markets. In this report, 'dynamic pay' refers to algorithmically-determined, variable and potentially personalised worker compensation for a task. This can include variable commission or take rates and other adjustments that make workers' pay unpredictable at the point of accepting work.

Many platform operators now use algorithms to set an individual price for each job that can vary from person to person and from job to job. This is presented as neutral or even beneficial: matching supply and demand in real time and rewarding workers for being in the right place at the right moment. This approach might be familiar, if not always liked, by many people in areas like concert or airline ticket pricing. But when applied to pay this represents a profound transformation of how wages are calculated, distributed, and justified. And workers are losing out.

Dynamic pay replaces fixed rates or transparent tariffs with opaque, constantly shifting pricing mechanisms. Under this system, two workers performing the same task may be paid entirely different amounts; a worker performing identical tasks across two days may receive vastly different pay; and individuals have almost no ability to anticipate income, plan financially, or verify the accuracy or fairness of their compensation. It is sometimes not even clear to workers how much they will be paid at the point they must decide whether to accept or reject an offer of work.

For workers, pay becomes decoupled from time, skill, or effort. Instead, it becomes a speculative outcome of an algorithmic process that remains largely invisible to those whose livelihoods depend on it. Workers describe themselves as "gambling," "leaving it to fate," or "waiting for the jackpot," because pay feels like the outcome of chance rather than work.

Dynamic pay functions as a wage-setting regime that structurally redistributes risk onto workers and weakens their capacity to anticipate earnings, contest pay outcomes, or negotiate collectively, regardless of whether any individual pricing decision is designed to achieve that outcome.

As the case studies in this project show, dynamic pay incentivises workers to accept less favourable jobs, stay online longer, and work more unpredictable hours, while expanding unpaid waiting time and producing high levels of income volatility. One study found that riders and drivers report spending an average of ten hours a week

waiting for jobs to come through on the app – so logged on and working but not making any money.[1]

The spread of dynamic pay has not occurred in a vacuum. Ambiguities over employment status allow platforms to say that those who work for them are workers with limited employment rights or, in some cases, self-employed workers with effectively no rights at all. This is despite exerting managerial control through algorithms and frequent requirements regarded the use of branded equipment and meeting company-determined standards.

This is coupled with the deliberate oversupply of labour that gives platforms the power to introduce extreme variability in pay. With tens of thousands of workers competing for a limited pool of jobs, a platform can offer rock-bottom wages and undermine pay certainty, confident that someone will always accept the work.

This structural oversupply interacts with other enabling conditions. Under the prevailing platform model, in areas like ride hail and food delivery, workers are not paid for waiting time: meaning they bear the risk if business is slower than expected. Meanwhile, state enforcement of employment and data rights is weak. Trade unions, whose reps provide a first line of defence against exploitation, have gained a foothold with national agreements at some operators. But the atomised nature of the workforce presents a significant barrier to building the collective strength needed to provide a strong countervailing force against the financial and technological power of platform employers backed by the UK's restrictive union laws.

At the same time, platform operators are trying to shift from expansion to profitability making it a priority to squeeze more value from workers.[2]

In this environment, dynamic pay operates by continually probing what rates workers will accept and shaping the distribution of work around those responses. The result is a wage-setting regime able to introduce wide variability and downward pressure on earnings because the labour market has been engineered to absorb it. Together, these conditions have created a system in which workers' incomes are determined by processes they cannot see, influence or meaningfully challenge, either individually or collectively.

The most comprehensive evidence on dynamic pay in the UK comes from the 2025 study conducted by University of Oxford and Worker Info Exchange (*Not Even Nice Work If You Can Get It*)[3], which analysed 1.5 million trips by 258 Uber drivers between

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[1] Wood, A. et al (June 2025). "Beyond the 'Gig Economy': Towards Variable Experiences of Job Quality in Platform Work", *Work, Employment and Society* Volume 39, Issue 5 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/09500170251336947

[2] Stacey, S. (8 October 2024). "Online gig platforms focus on profits as workers return to office", *Financial Times* www.ft.com/content/6189ba99-df17-4f80-aca2-4214a482bb98

[3] Binns, R. et al. (2025), "Not Even Nice Work If You Can Get It; A Longitudinal Study of Uber's Algorithmic Pay and Pricing," arXiv preprint arXiv:2506.15278 https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2506.15278

2016 and 2024. The findings support what workers have described: dynamic pay is not simply more sophisticated pricing, it is a new wage-setting regime that reduces pay, increases inequality, and makes stable income impossible.

Central to the study is the finding that after Uber introduced dynamic pricing in 2023:

- Platform take rates increased substantially. Uber had long presented a nominal 25 per cent commission, but dynamic pricing transforms this into a variable and personalised take. The study found that drivers now frequently retain only 50–60 per cent of the fare, with Uber taking over half on many trips. The median driver retained just 71 per cent, and only 46 per cent of drivers retained 75 per cent or more. Uber's surplus per hour increased by 38 per cent following the introduction of dynamic pay.
- Drivers' real pay declined and became more volatile. Taking into account all the worker's time logged onto the app when they were available for work[4], average pay per hour fell in real terms after dynamic pricing. Even under Uber's narrower definition ("engaged time" only), real hourly pay declined.
- Unpaid working time increased significantly. Drivers now spend more time waiting for work than performing trips, meaning much of their working day generates no income.
- Predictability collapsed. Using machine learning models, researchers demonstrated that earnings for similar trips could no longer be predicted based on past patterns. Pay became a function of algorithmic behaviour that workers could not anticipate or influence.
- Inequality between workers increased. The study found a widening gap between "winners" and "losers," even among workers doing comparable jobs. Post-dynamic pricing, 93 out of 114 drivers earned less, while only 21 earned more. Drivers doing the same work increasingly receive different pay due to what appears to be personalised algorithmic decisions.

These findings confirm that dynamic pay is not simply confusing. It systematically redistributes value from workers to platforms and erodes the preconditions of fair wage-setting and the principle of same job, same pay.

This is occurring at a time when the government is pursuing its *Plan to Make Work Pay* aimed at overhauling the labour market. Early reforms, which have recently received

[4] This was the employment tribunal's definition of working time in *Uber BV v Aslam* www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2019-0029. In Ashfar and others v Addison Lee, a judgment handed down in January 2025, the tribunal ruled that all passenger drivers, courier drivers and executive drivers are working for the company during the times they are logged onto its app or mobile device https://oldsquare.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Afshar-Ors-v-Addison-Lee-Ltd-judgment-3306435-2020-Ors-Reserved-judgment-of-6-1-25.pdf.

parliamentary approval[5], seek to deal with exploitation at the sharp end of the labour market, for instance by giving variable hours workers a route onto secure contracts and making it harder for employers to dismiss employees without cause. It also paves the way for a stronger collective voice in the economy by providing unions with a right to access workplaces (including digital access) to talk to workers; dismantling some of the barriers to union recognition; and dissolving some of the anti-worker legislation of the last 10 years.

What this report shows is that more is needed to tackle the novel form of exploitation taking place in the platform economy.

We propose three key sets of measures:

- Ending the use of dynamic pay. The government, in its *Plan to Make Work Pay*, is committed to jobs that provide workers with fair pay and security. Dynamic pay is not the logical next stage in development of the platform economy. Rather as the evidence shows, dynamic pay increases the insecurity of worker's wages, and undermines the principle of 'same pay for same job'. It is not the logical next stage in development of the platform economy. Under the guise of 'innovation' it is little more than a throwback to a bygone era where employers did their utmost to disguise how wage-setting worked.[6]
- Urgent employment status reform. The government, in its *Plan to Make Work Pay*, is already committed to reform of employment status, including moving towards a single status of worker away from the current division between workers and employees. This must be a priority. Employment status is the fundamental building block towards secure work, fair pay and collective bargaining, which are all government aims. Without a sound employment status regime, exploitation of workers will only get worse. A particular focus should be put on tackling bogus self-employment.
- Collective data rights for trade unions. The TUC, working with a cross-party group of stakeholders has set out a model for how this might work in a model AI Bill. Power in the workplace is already tilted towards employers and operators. Algorithmic dynamic pay-setting skews it further. Only by allowing the pooling of worker data and placing transparency obligations on employers and operators can some of this imbalance start to be addressed.

The following case studies examine how dynamic pay shapes the everyday realities of platform economy workers. They capture the uncertainty and stress created when pay

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[5] Pickard, J. and Strauss, D. (16 December 2025). "UK government's flagship workers' rights legislation clears final hurdle", *Financial Times* www.ft.com/content/60f5cdde-7b60-4d88-9033-32812ead2da0

[6] Dubal, V (21 August 2025). How artificial intelligence uncouples hard work from fair wages through 'surveillance pay' practices—and how to fix it. Washington Center for Equitable Growth https://equitablegrowth.org/how-artificial-intelligence-uncouples-hard-work-from-fair-wages-through-surveillance-pay-practices-and-how-to-fix-it/

fluctuates according to opaque algorithms, highlighting how this affects workers' ability to plan, earn a stable income, and maintain their wellbeing.

Each account illustrates the broader human cost of a system that transfers risk from platforms to individuals, revealing how insecurity and employer power extend into workers' personal lives.

Case study 1. Mehmet: “My life is more important than whatever the algorithm decides”

Mehmet has spent almost nine years driving for Uber in London. He joined after losing his business, seeking “to work freely… without the responsibility of other people,” and because he genuinely enjoyed driving. Uber’s market share quickly made it his main source of income: “they provide more passengers and more work,” he explains. Over the years he has seen other platforms come and go, but Uber remained constant and, in his eyes, increasingly dominant and increasingly controlling.

Dynamic pay, he says, has always been part of Uber’s self-presentation, but something changed after a Supreme Court ruling in favour of workers’ rights in 2021. “It became a bit more aggressive after the court case,” he recalls. “They became quite aggressive with it, that is my feeling.” This shift fundamentally altered the nature of his work. “There is no fixed tariff,” he says. “It can go to the bottom… For the same journey I could make fifteen pounds, I am offered six, seven pounds.”

The volatility, more than the lower pay itself, has left him unable to plan a week’s income. “It makes the income very unpredictable, very unreliable.” He often tries to understand the gap between what he is paid and what passengers are charged. “I recently had one passenger paying twenty-five pounds and me getting only twelve and a half,” he says. But he does not ask often, as “it is not comfortable on the customer side.” This unpredictability had a profound emotional effect. “I used to go out to make a certain amount of money,” he explains. “Now I am leaving it to fate.” If he tries to chase earnings, “I feel like I’m abused more by Uber,” so he now works to protect his own mental state: “I control my mindset… not to be abused.”

A major factor in his loss of control is Uber’s six-second acceptance countdown. Jobs appear on the screen with a short, urgent timer; rejecting too many risks the algorithm withholding work. He calls this a form of cognitive pressure disguised as choice. “Do I like the six seconds? No, I don't like it. I feel like it’s against human rights,” he says. “Who can decide on something so vital, repetitively, in six, seven seconds… even though we are trained?”.

These pressures of unpredictability, coercive timing, the constant mental alertness the system demands, have accumulated over years. Then, six months before this interview, he suffered a heart attack. “The whole thing happened on a weekday after I had worked for Uber,” he recalls. “It was a Wednesday. It was not a good Uber day. It was a slow Uber day.” That day he had been stressed about meeting a daily target. The following morning, after hours of discomfort, paramedics told him: “You had a heart attack.” He

was taken to hospital, fitted with a stent, and remained there for five days. During that stay, he was also diagnosed with diabetes.

Reflecting on it, he says, “I was carrying the stress of Uber on my shoulders… I was thinking of work at that time.” The experience changed everything. “If I didn't have the heart attack, probably I would feel the stress ongoing,” he says. But now he sees his health as the priority. “My life is more important than whatever the income will be.” He has also observed something unsettling since his recovery: “Whether I work one or two days a week or not, I am in the same bracket. My hours can go up and down, but the money I make is around the same.” He believes there may be “a cap, a limit to how much you can earn,” built into the system. “The algorithm is playing its game,” he says. “Uber is trying to keep me within the same range.” This sense of being constrained extends to his working hours. He now concentrates on early mornings and early evenings. “Flexibility is a big hype,” he says. “If I don't work at the hours dictated by the market, I’m not making any money… I'm working at hours I have to work. I'm obliged to work.” His comparison is simple: a restaurant could open at night, but if it wants to survive, it must open when customers want food. That, he says, is the reality of Uber.

Airport jobs expose another flaw. When passengers need to catch flights, he avoids the shorter city-route the app recommends and instead takes the M25, which is faster but longer. Passengers ask for this, and he agrees: “I am not objecting.” He does the right thing, but then Uber refuses to pay for the extra mileage. After experiencing this “a number of times,” he has repeatedly contacted customer support, but he says, “I feel like I'm talking to myself.” Whenever support says they will “escalate to a specialised team,” he now interprets that as code for closing the complaint. “They escalate the issue to kill it.”

It is here that Mehmet makes one of his most serious points: that dynamic pricing harms not only drivers, but passengers. Tired drivers, he argues, are a direct risk. “If I'm tired, I will be crashing the car,” he says. “Dynamic pricing is not against the driver human rights only. It is against the passenger human rights as well.” Fatigue caused by extended hours, which drivers feel compelled to work to hit unstable income targets, creates an environment in which safety cannot be guaranteed. “Passengers expect a certain service… but they are not aware of the pressure the driver is under,” he explains.

Mehmet understands that Uber is a business, but he repeatedly returns to the idea of misplaced risk. “Dynamic pay should be managed intelligently,” he argues. “The price should not be paid by the driver… It shouldn’t be my risk. It should be the company’s risk.” Yet, because Uber dominates the market, “I have no option. If I am doing this job, I will be working with Uber.” The imbalance between platform power and driver vulnerability is, for him, the defining characteristic of dynamic pay. “Why am I paying the price of an algorithm?” he asks. “I am paying from my health and from my income.”

Mehmet’s account shows how dynamic pay combines income volatility with time-compressed decision-making, undermining health, safety, and making meaningful redress impossible.

Case Study 2. Khurram: “We are thinking more about our work than our families.”

Khurram, who is in his 40s, began driving for Uber in London during the pandemic after years in hotel work. At first, the job offered a sense of stability and autonomy, with a fixed 25 per cent commission and predictable earnings. That changed when Uber introduced dynamic pricing, which he experienced as a loss of control and transparency.

“When I started, I was on a fixed rate of 25 per cent commission,” Khurram explained. “Then they brought in this dynamic commission, so you’re not sure how much money they’ll take out of every trip”. The system also rolled a portion of holiday pay directly into each fare, which he said made it almost impossible to predict his income.

Despite recognising that many fares were not financially viable after deducting fuel, maintenance, and insurance, Khurram felt forced to accept nearly every job: “You keep thinking…if I won't accept it, someone else will”. The fear of losing work or being penalised by the algorithm shaped his decisions throughout the day. He gave the example of a 240-mile Heathrow–Birmingham return job that paid just £90, and a 31-mile round trip from Mayfair to Heathrow for £22. Both were well below what he considered sustainable.

Such experiences left Khurram convinced that the company relied on inexperienced or desperate drivers. “They capitalise on those kind of drivers … new in the industry. They just want to make money no matter what,” he said. “Any right-minded person wouldn’t do half the jobs offered to them in a day.”

He also described confusion around what determined the price. “It could be time of the day, demand in the area, driver’s availability, driver’s distance from the job, customer’s rating, my rating. There's so many things”, he said, noting that Uber often withheld key information, such as multiple stops, until after he had accepted a job. When drivers raised concerns, he said, Uber’s response was to hide behind the algorithm: “the system … we understand [it] is the system, but you're still controlling that system.”

The result was longer hours, greater fatigue, and growing tension at home. “We are more under pressure than before,” he explained. His working day extended from ten to twelve hours, with few breaks.

“I am sleeping at least two hours less than before, because I have to spend a couple of hours extra on the road now to make money. So, where I was doing 10 hours in past, I'm doing 12 hours now… So, we are thinking more about our work than our families… And the support from [Uber] is again, minimum”.

The fatigue, he said, also created safety risks: “So, we are doing more wrong things on the roads … we are parking wrong, we are having arguments for no reason because we are frustrated. And when you're frustrated, you make mistakes… even the customers have noticed it, like the drivers are more aggressive now than before… You're tired, you're spending long hours … your family's questioning like, why you are … spending this much time out there?”

He linked this to frustration and exhaustion, describing a workforce under continuous strain with minimal support from Uber.

Khurram’s story illustrates how dynamic pricing erodes transparency and pay stability, forcing workers into longer hours to maintain income while shifting commercial risk entirely onto them. For him, the system represents not flexibility but dependency, a constant balancing act between acceptance rates, algorithmic pressure, and personal exhaustion.

Khurram’s experience exposes the financial and psychological cost of unpredictable pay. This is also outlined in the experience of other drivers, including the story of Zara (case study 4) that further reveals how gender and safety intersect with these same stressors. Khurram’s account also demonstrates how variable take-home rates and information withholding intensify acceptance pressure, extending working hours and transferring fatigue and safety risks onto workers.

Case Study 3. Vladimir: “It’s too unfair. I want to smash my screen.”

Vladimir is a London based- driver who has worked for Uber since 2016, long enough to remember when the job was fully transparent and financially sustainable. “When I started, there was a simple mathematical formula,” he explains. “You put the mileage and the time in Excel and you could calculate exactly what you’d get.” Over time that clarity disappeared. “Uber went from 100 per cent transparency… to 0 per cent transparency. Everything is ‘flexible’. The fare is flexible. The commission is flexible. What the driver gets is flexible. No one knows.”

This collapse in transparency has shaped the entire structure of his life. He now works “seven out of seven,” with weekdays of “10, 11, 12 hours,” and weekends only slightly shorter. The reason is simple: “Any small trick Uber did led to me working more. I always compensated the cuts from Uber with more time.” Every drop in pay translates directly into additional hours on the road.

Vladimir meticulously tracks his earnings and expenses. He knows exactly what each hour costs him in petrol, repairs, cleaning, car hire, and depreciation. And he knows how the pay has collapsed. “What’s frustrating is I get less than what I was getting nine years ago,” he says. He sees fares that once paid £10 now offering £7 or £8. He estimates he only accepts about “18 per cent of the jobs” the system sends him because so many offers are “unacceptable… six miles, seven pounds, eight pounds.” The frustration is visceral: “I want to smash my screen. It feels miserable.” His analysis of driver investment shocks him when he calculates it: "A driver that does it full time has costs of £2,000 a month. Imagine 50,000 drivers, we invest £1.2 billion a year to provide this service, drivers' money. I don't think the investors behind Uber invest this much. We are the big investors, not the investors."

The mental load of the job is built around continuous calculation. Every job Uber presents demands instant judgement: the time to pick-up, the likely delays, the petrol cost, whether the app’s route is realistic or a trap. “A new driver that starts now for Uber… they definitely earn less than minimum wage,” he says, because they haven’t yet learned these calculations. He gives examples: a £25 trip lasting an hour and a half becomes “seven pounds an hour after expenses.” A £5 station run that takes 20 minutes leaves the driver below minimum wage once costs are accounted for. “It’s miserable,” he repeats, always returning to that word because the maths simply does not work.

The need to constantly document what is happening has led him to build a personal archive of evidence. “My phone is full of screenshots,” he says. Screenshots of fares, of comparisons to older pricing, of inconsistencies in what Uber pays versus what it used to, of times and distances that do not match what he should have earned. Keeping

these screenshots is part of how he tries to protect himself in a system that hides its workings from drivers.

His interactions with Uber's fare review system reinforce this mistrust. When a fare is incorrect, he opens a case but almost always receives the same generic response. "Always the same," he says. "It matches the time and distance." He knows this is not true because he checks the time and distance himself. "It doesn't match," he says plainly. "And they close it." Even when he sends screenshots proving that the platform underpaid him, the answer is the same: "It matches." These disputes "never go anywhere," and the repetition of the same scripted response leaves him feeling the platform is simply refusing to engage with reality.

Years of this work have left him not just exhausted but disillusioned. He talks openly about being disappointed in himself for staying so long in a job that deteriorated so significantly. "I'm ashamed of myself because when I finished uni in my 20s, I had a very good professional start. I worked for an American telecom company in the finance department, started a small business." How he ended up driving for Uber involves details he doesn't want to discuss, but the regret is profound. "You're not progressing in any way. You get rusty, your value decreases in the work environment. You're a driver, anyone can be a driver. But you invest all these years to help Uber grow with your time that you're not getting back, professionally at least, to get paid less and less and less. This is why I'm disgusted. I'm disappointed by me first of all."

He feels stuck between the need to work and the knowledge that the work is draining his health. "I put on weight… you work so much… seven out of seven," he explains. His herniated disc has worsened. He now lives with chronic pain and haemorrhoids. "I can't get rid of them," he says. He has seen doctors multiple times. "I need to make a change. There's so many reasons, Uber being one of the main ones."

His financial situation reflects years of declining income. He took loans when he believed his income was stable. "I was counting on constant income… which decreased in time," he says.

After nine years, he has reached a limit. "I'll quit in maximum four months," he says. He has already postponed travel plans and personal commitments because he could not afford time off. Now he is preparing to leave the industry entirely.

His assessment of the job, and of dynamic pay, remains stark and consistent: "It's too unfair." Everything else, his declining health, the screenshots, the fare disputes, the seven-day weeks, comes back to that fundamental conclusion.

Case Study 4. Zara (pseudonym): “It drains you.”

Zara, who is in her 40s, began driving for Uber in the Midlands in 2023 after struggling to find steady work in her previous occupation. She hoped platform work would provide flexibility and independence, but dynamic pricing soon undermined both.

“I work only throughout the whole day and … early in the morning till evening time… I find it very unfair that there are female drivers that want to work, but we can't work the areas that the male drivers can do because obviously … we're going to feel unsafe… So, throughout the day, they'll give us the lowest fares… It's just absolutely horrendous prices”, she explained. Safety concerns meant she avoided night shifts, the very periods when “surge” prices were often highest. As a result, her daily earnings remained low and unpredictable.

“The prices change so much, up and down,” she said.

“You just all over the place because you … can't know what … you're going to be earning. Like, there'll be days … and I'm like, oh my God … I can't live on this. Like, it could be 60 to 80 pounds … So how can you live off that kind of wage?”

Given that the company calculates working time only from passenger pick-up to drop-off, excluding long waiting periods between jobs, “It’s below even the minimum wage,” she said.

The uncertainty affected every part of her life. “If you’ve got commitments and family and children, then you just can't plan it because you don't know what your wage is going be, because every month your wage goes up and down, up and down” she said. “It drains you”. She described sleepless nights, poor diet, and a sense of constant anxiety about bills.

Dynamic pricing also complicated her sense of control over the job. She noticed the option for customers to make cash payments reactivating on her app even after she had turned them off, leaving her feeling unsafe: “Sometimes it happens. You’ve switched it off, but somehow Uber switches it back on”. This reinforced her perception that the platform’s systems prioritised revenue rather than driver safety.

When the level of payment dropped between acceptance and payment, her attempts to query this were dismissed: “They say, oh, have you got any … pictures or anything to send us to say that was a correct price? But surely their systems should be able to pick that up”. Such moments deepened her frustration, illustrating the lack of accountability within algorithmic pay systems.

Her schedule reflected the cost of this instability: six days a week, up to thirteen hours a day. “You have a day off? Yeah. You are absolutely exhausted”, she said. “But if I don't

go the next day, I won't earn the money that I need to earn to pay all … outgoing ... So, it's just like … a cycle because you think, I need to do it". This cycle left her socially isolated, working only to cover basic expenses.

"Obviously if they gave us good prices in the day as well, we could have a manageable … better life" she said. "Our health would be much better". For Zara, dynamic pricing magnified inequality, exposing women drivers to both economic and physical insecurity. It trapped her in an exhausting loop of unpredictable earnings and deteriorating wellbeing, an experience that speaks to the broader consequences of algorithmic wage control.

Zara's account shows how dynamic pay interacts with gendered safety constraints, excluding women from higher-paying hours and deepening income insecurity and exhaustion

Case Study 5. Claude: “You need to be working literally Monday to Sunday to make the money that you can pay your bills.”

Claude, a man in his 20s with a master’s degree, began food delivery work for Deliveroo and Uber Eats in the Midlands after leaving a job at McDonald’s. At first, he saw it as a pathway to better pay and more freedom.

That sense of autonomy faded as platforms introduced dynamic pricing. Early “boosts” and promotional rates disguised an underlying trend of falling pay. “They didn’t really increase the pay,” he said.

“They just had these promotional things…called Boost where if you were getting, say, £2 for a certain trip it was now sort of doubled or tripled… but that was temporary. So, when that went down, they went back to their normal calculations and, and that's when I realised how bad it really was, you know? So, from that point, the pay started getting bad.”

As base rates fell, he relied on long hours to reach a minimum earnings target of £100 per day, based on what was necessary to cover their living expenses.

“But it means you start early in the morning and finish at least 10 to 12 at night … and you need to be working literally Monday to Sunday to make the money that you can pay your bills… I'm not sure you can have enough for saving… We have to work those hours because if you don't … then you're not going to survive.”

The system, he explained, rewards constant availability and penalises selective behaviour. “It knows how far you are willing to go, the type of pay you … prepare to accept. So, for instance, as a minimum fee, if you keep accepting £3…it will always come to you with £3.”

He described it as a form of auction: “It will send the same order to about 20 or even more drivers, and whoever accepts first gets the order. And so that basically means … [the chances of] a low order being accepted by somebody is very high, especially when it is very slow”.

He spoke about a recent innovation involving multiple orders being added together and presented as a single order of high value, which he regarded as a way of manipulating riders and drivers into accepting while also offering the company a higher profit margin.

Claude also noticed that dynamic pricing shaped not only pay but the rhythm of daily life. Over time, the pressure created exhaustion, poor sleep, and declining health.

“It means really you're not very stable on the wheel because you’re actually sleepy… how many hours you're working and how well you are sleeping per day … most drivers do not always have a good sleep if they're trying to reach a certain target.”

Despite the apparent flexibility, Claude felt increasingly dependent on the platform and linked this to deteriorating mental health and social isolation

“Bike could break … any time. And if you don't have any money to fix it, that's you done. If you take a holiday or you … fell sick for too long … if anything happens and you are unable to work, then it means that you're going to be behind, your bills will be kicking in and that will affect your mental health and it becomes a horrible place to be. So many drivers trying to keep up with that by having a target and consistently working almost without break.”

Claude’s account captures the broader dynamics of algorithmic management, surveillance, constant competition, and wage instability, that push workers to accept declining pay for fear of losing access to work. Dynamic pricing feels like, he said, “it is trying to get drivers to accept the least amount possible.”

For Claude, flexibility has become an illusion. The platform decides when he works, what he earns, and how long he stays on the road. His experience reveals how data-driven pay systems reconfigure risk and dependency, reducing workers’ bargaining power and blurring the line between autonomy and control.

Claude’s account illustrates how behavioural data and acceptance histories are folded into dynamic pay, reinforcing downward pressure on earnings and dependence on long working hours.

Case Study 6. Mohammed: “It’s like gambling. I’m putting in my time, hoping for a jackpot.”

When Lincoln-based Mohammed arrived in the UK in 2020 to study law and criminology, he entered the world of food delivery because it was the only work available during the coronavirus lockdown. What struck him then was how workable it felt. With nothing but “a normal push bike,” he says, “I could pay rent, buy food… I could survive, more than survive, living a good life.” Those early months now feel unrecognisable compared to the reality he faces today. Each year, he explains, the conditions worsened: “The first year was really good, next year was good, next year bad… going downhill.” He had to upgrade to an electric bike, then work more hours, then switch to a car, and eventually leave delivery entirely for Uber’s ride-hailing platform. Even there, what once required “three, four hours in the morning… three more hours at night” now demands “12–14 hours to make the same money I was doing four years ago. Every week, every month I’m adding one more hour… to make the same money.”

Dynamic pay is the mechanism that has driven this shift. Mohammed describes it with a clarity that comes only from lived exhaustion: “It’s like gambling. Instead of going with the money and gamble, you’re putting your time.” When he goes out to work, he is “hoping, you know, for the jackpot, for a big job, for a good pay,” and that hope keeps him online far beyond what is healthy. He finds himself saying, “Okay, I’m going to stay one more hour… one more hour… hoping that the dynamic kicks in, the surge comes.” This behaviour is not incidental but induced. The possibility of a high-paying trip - rare, unpredictable, algorithmically rationed - keeps him working longer and longer. “It messes up with you,” he says. Even at home, he feels pulled back in: “I’m always checking the app, even if I’m home… maybe it’s surging, let me check.” This compulsive monitoring has become woven into his everyday life.

The instability is extreme. Prices rise and fall in ways he cannot anticipate: “Today I’m going to work… tomorrow morning I go online and I see a price drop. Why? No one knows.” A few years ago, the minimum fare in his area was £4.80. Then, without warning, “it went down to £3.20.” There is no announcement, no explanation, no adjustment period. “They never say anything. You just wake up and it’s changed.” He experiences this not as the normal flux of a market but as a series of quiet degradations in pay. The justification Uber provides, that lower prices attract more customers and therefore create more work, rings hollow. “If I do three pounds jobs, how is that going to help me?” he asks. Passengers pay increasingly high fares: “They’re charging them ridiculous amount of money… twenty pounds for one, two miles.” Meanwhile, drivers

receive “six, seven pounds.” For Mohammed, the asymmetry is stark: “They are the only ones winning here. We are not winning. The customers are losing.”

Underpinning everything is a structural concealment in how Uber calculates pay. The platform counts only the active driving time. “You can do one job that takes 20 minutes, then wait another 40 minutes.” From his point of view, that is one hour of work for five pounds. “But in Uber’s eyes, you made five pounds in 20 minutes. What’s happening outside the driving time is not their problem.” This allows Uber to claim drivers earn minimum wage, even though the waiting time that makes the job viable is disregarded. “That’s how they get away with it,” he says.

Dynamic pricing has also reshaped how he must physically position himself to work. He now relies on what he calls “dead miles” to coax better fares from the algorithm. “If you’re sitting two minutes away from the pickup, they give you a low price. If you stay ten or twenty minutes away, they put the price up.” This means Uber gives the closest driver £3.90 while offering Mohammed £7 if he is farther away, but at the cost of “double, triple the miles.” It is a perverse system in which the most efficient behaviour is punished and the most wasteful is rewarded. “That’s the strategy,” he explains. “Take far pickups to make a good pay per hour, but then you’re wasting time and fuel.”

The financial consequences are profound. Mohammed cannot predict his weekly income at all. “There are no two consecutive weeks where I’m making the same money for the same hours… The differences are in hundreds of pounds.” This volatility makes budgeting impossible. “If next week is not busy, I’m not making money. If they decide that week to keep prices low, I’m not making any money.” This uncertainty has pushed him into debt: “I have my credit card maxed out.” Even essential car maintenance requires instalment plans: “When I’m buying tyres, I have to finance them… a three-month payment assist. I have email confirmation.” He describes the situation simply: “It’s crazy.”

Compounding this stress is intensive, asymmetrical surveillance. Uber sends him weekly driver dashboards detailing his “sharp turns,” “emergency brakes,” and “speeding.” “They’re monitoring everything,” he says. He also lost access to his account once without explanation: “You wake up… you want to go online… doesn’t work.” When he contacted support, “the automated robot message” listed 20 potential reasons but never told him which applied. He spent a year off the app until a union helped him regain access. “They never tell you so you can prove it didn’t happen.”

For now, Mohammed continues driving because he is finishing his Master’s degree, and the supposed flexibility fits around his studies, but it is clear he sees little future in the work. “Once I finish… there’s no way. No exploitation,” he says. “It’s getting worse and worse.” What remains is clarity about what dynamic pay has become: a system of behavioural manipulation masquerading as flexibility, one that turns labour into a wager and makes survival contingent on the whims of an opaque algorithm. As he puts it: “It’s like gambling. One more hour, one more hour… It messes up with you.”

Case Study 7. Jordan: “Dynamic pay took a job you could live on and turned it into pocket money”

Jordan in Nottingham began delivering during lockdown, after being furloughed from his job as a chef. At first, the platforms did exactly what they promised: they provided real income. “During the lockdowns… the roads were quiet and the pay was good,” he recalls. Even as society reopened, “the pay was still okay… it was adequate.” In those early months, delivery work didn’t feel like a gamble. It felt like work; predictable, sufficient, something he could rely on.

That stability did not last. As the platforms grew and more workers joined, Jordan watched the pay “start to drop off,” and the job quickly lost its viability. What disturbed him most was not just that the pay fell, but that it fell in ways he could neither see nor understand. Each job began to be priced “differently based on factors that are a little bit unclear.” He could no longer tell what determined his income, or who or what was deciding it. “How do I know what I'm getting paid for?” he asks. “Who really decides that? Is it just some sort of AI-type algorithm?” The opacity itself became a form of pressure.

Dynamic pay did not simply reduce earnings; it restructured the job into something fundamentally unstable. The platform, Jordan explains, expects riders to internalise that instability, to learn to chase whatever fleeting opportunity appears on the screen. The economic logic of his shifts changed dramatically. Even on a bicycle, when travel times were “adequate,” the real effort lay in trying to accumulate enough jobs fast enough to make a shift worthwhile. “There’s still the pressure of wanting to earn X amount,” he says, even when the platform no longer made that outcome likely. He rode faster, pushed harder, and tried to squeeze more deliveries into each hour, but the algorithm did not reward effort. It absorbed it.

In effect, dynamic pay transformed the core structure of the job. Where once the income flowed predictably from work completed, earnings were now contingent on an invisible and fluctuating set of algorithmic calculations. Jordan began to feel that the platform was conditioning workers to accept whatever rate they were offered even when the work became unsafe, poorly paid, or not worth the risk. The supposed “flexibility” of gig work disappeared beneath this new logic. He no longer felt that he controlled when or how he earned; the system controlled that.

The deterioration of night-time work reveals this clearly. During the early pandemic period, he could work until “2am or 3am,” and the conditions made sense: quiet roads, solid pay, a feeling of safety. Now, he says, “I couldn’t imagine even doing that… I wouldn’t feel safe whatsoever to do that now.” But what struck him even more was that

the app did nothing to compensate for increased danger. Delivery requests still came through for areas he considered unsafe, but they never paid more for the risk. The pricing system was indifferent to safety. “I don’t recall seeing any delivery that was slightly more expensive because of the danger factor,” he says. The platform pushed the risk onto him without sharing any of the reward.

The harassment he experienced on the road, cars shouting at him, threats and unpredictable encounters became part of the job. Delivery workers learned to absorb it silently because the system offered no alternative: no hazard pay, no risk adjustments, no protections. “Anything can happen anytime, really,” he says. That uncertainty became part of the emotional landscape of work that was already financially precarious.

Over time, the exhaustion and declining pay hollowed the job out. The platform’s dynamic pricing model meant earnings no longer reflected the labour he put in, only the algorithm’s shifting judgement about what the platform wanted to pay at that moment. The job that had once sustained him gradually became non-viable. He eventually found part-time work at Tesco, and delivery became something else entirely: not a job, not a livelihood, but mere top-up money. “The pay had become the new norm,” he says. A norm in which gig work could no longer support a worker, only supplement them.

For Jordan, this shift from sustainable work to pocket money is the clearest evidence of what dynamic pay has done. It has stripped the job of its economic value, its safety, and its dignity. It has turned labour into a speculative activity governed by an algorithm no one can scrutinise. And it has entrenched a model in which platforms externalise all the risk onto workers while controlling every meaningful dimension of pay.

His view on dynamic pricing expanding into other sectors is unequivocal. “I hope that doesn’t happen,” he says. The idea that essential work could be paid through the same opaque fluctuations that gutted delivery work alarms him deeply. “Who really decides that?… I don’t think we should put our trust in that just yet.” The caution in his voice reflects the broader truth of his experience: dynamic pay is not innovation but degradation. It takes once-viable work and reduces it to precarious, unpredictable scraps.

Jordan’s story shows the endpoint of dynamic pricing in gig work: a labour market where the job no longer provides a living, only spare change, and where the algorithm determines not just what a worker earns, but whether the work has meaning at all.

Case Study 8. Kola: “Sometimes you feel like you’re breaking rocks with a sledgehammer.”

Kola in London has been driving on Uber’s platform for more than eight years. He began when a friend, a full-time Uber driver, told him it was a good way to earn money to support his family. “I got into the platform by way of trying to earn extra money to support my family who lives abroad,” he explains. Over time, Uber became his full-time work, not because he chose it, but because he had no other option that could cover the responsibilities he carries. “I have four children,” he says. “Twenty-two, thirteen… twins. And I support my elderly mother. She doesn’t get pension… she lives with me.”

Supporting so many dependents means he cannot turn away from the platform no matter how bad the conditions become. “Yes,” he says bluntly when asked if this is his primary income. “It is.”

What stands out in Kola’s story is the mental and physical exhaustion, born directly from the structure of dynamic pay. The biggest pressure comes from Uber’s five-second acceptance window. “We’ve been blindfolded,” he says. “You don’t know how the price works. You just see a number and you have five seconds to decide. If you don’t take it, you’ll be there the whole day, 12 hours, 15 hours, literally just driving around.” The impossibility of making that decision safely is obvious to him: “You are driving, looking at your phone, looking at the road… you are making a calculation on the spot. It is totally exhausting.”

Then he adds: “Sometimes you feel like you’re breaking rocks with a sledgehammer.”

Kola often describes the danger of this system. He talks about ‘trip radar’, Uber’s broadcast offers where drivers must make near-instant judgements on whether to accept a job while navigating traffic. He has seen accidents happen because of this. “It is dangerous,” he says. “Some drivers had an accident simply because of this. Just trying to make a living.”

The work is not just physically dangerous, it is mentally draining. “It is mental stress,” he says. The stress does not come from driving itself, but from the never-ending micro-calculations he must make: “You look at the miles… sometimes five miles will give you seven pounds. Other times the same five miles gives you 11 pounds. You don’t know why. So I try to do my own calculation, two pounds per mile. When it comes close to that, I take it. When it is four pounds for five miles, I reject it.”

But rejecting jobs creates another trap: Uber can stop sending work. “If you don’t take it… they will probably not send you many jobs,” he says. This forces drivers into impossible decisions: take a bad job or risk being punished by the system.

He also sees the exploitation of drivers who cannot do these calculations or lack the digital and language skills to contest unfair decisions. “Some of our drivers who are not literate like that… they don’t know how to challenge anything,” he says. He is clear that Uber takes advantage of this. “It is exploitation. They know they will not challenge anything.”

Even when he tries to challenge pricing, the system feels closed to him. He explains that when a trip takes longer or goes farther than Uber predicted, he contacts support but almost always gets the same automated denials. “We don’t know how they are calculating,” he says. “You present it… you say the journey took longer… they just say ‘no’. Decision made.” The sense of helplessness is constant. “It is frustrating.”

Another major stressor is the platform’s surveillance and the ever-present threat of losing access to work. “The fear is there,” he says. “You don’t know when your last job is going to be.” False complaints from passengers, about music, about brakes, about anything, can get a driver suspended. “They say they do [an] investigation, but they never contact you,” he says. “You are scared. Everybody is scared.” Kola himself was wrongly blocked from the platform once.

Passengers’ reactions sometimes reveal the absurdity of dynamic pay. When they tell him how much they paid, the gap becomes obvious. “Sometimes the rider paid 25 pounds, and I get 12 and a half,” he says. “Sixty percent is taken.” Passengers are often shocked. “They are angry at Uber,” he notes. “I am angry too.”

It’s taking a toll on Kola’s family life. Long hours, stress, and sheer exhaustion have hollowed out the time and energy he once had for his children. “It breaks my heart that I now always see my children just once in a while during the day,” he said. “I can’t even go out with them when the sun is shining… we used to go to the park, you know, fresh air, playground, family time.” Now he returns home drained, unable to be present in the way he wants to be. “By the time I come back, I’m exhausted. I just want to have that little piece of time. It’s taking a toll on the family, and I know this.” For Kola, dynamic pricing is reshaping his role as a father and eroding his connection with his family.

Kola’s testimony depicts a system designed to keep drivers working as long as possible for as little as possible. He says he used to be able to work five or six days and earn a decent income. Now he works six or seven days and earns the same or less. “You can’t set a target,” he says. “You just work 12 hours and hope. Whatever it is, you go home. But you are not earning enough money.”

Despite everything, he continues because his responsibilities to his children and to his mother do not stop. The platform knows it has drivers like him in a bind. He puts it simply: “I need to support them. I cannot stop. Uber knows we cannot stop.” The final truth he offers is simple and devastating: “You are working, working, working… and you are not even earning enough. It is a cycle, the same devil cycle.”

Case Study 9. Maryan: “As a mother, I don’t have a day off. As a driver, I don’t have a day off.”

Maryan in London began driving for Uber in 2016, choosing the work because it promised flexibility. As a single mother of four and the primary carer for her special-needs mother who lives with her, she needed a job that allowed her to “drive from 8:30am to 2pm, then go home and do mum’s job… cook, clean, look after the children, take them to tuition.” In the early years, the arrangement worked. “For the beginning, it was very good,” she says. “As flexible as a mother, it was good… we used to have good jobs, good pay.” But dynamic pay has transformed that work beyond recognition. What was once manageable now consumes almost every hour of her life.

She describes her responsibilities plainly: “I look after my mum, who’s special needs… she lives with me,” she says. “It’s really hard… as a mother, as a daughter, as a lone parent.” The pressure to keep the household going, to support her children and her mother, to provide the only income in the family, leaves her constantly stretched. “I’m trying to be strong,” she says. “I have to work as much as I can… but I also have to look after myself. I have to have energy.”

Dynamic pay makes that nearly impossible. The system pushes earnings into narrow peak hours, early mornings and late evenings, precisely the times she cannot consistently work because of the school run, childcare, and caring duties. “Now, if I don’t drop my kids to school,” she says, “I would have started earlier… 6.30am to 11am That’s when you earn the most money. But because of me, my situation, I’m a mother… I cannot make it.” When asked directly whether she feels excluded from the most profitable times, she answers without hesitation: “Yes. Yes indeed. 100 per cent.”

Dynamic pay also forces her to work far longer hours than before. “We used to work five, six hours,” she explains. “Now: ten, twelve hours we have to work… because of the dynamic price.” She now works 50 to 60 hours a week, sometimes six days straight. “As a mother,” she says, “we don’t have no day off. And we’re always on track with the children.” But now, even after the household work is done, “I still have to rush to go back to work… otherwise we cannot earn.” Her days stretch from the moment she wakes up until late at night, and still the income is unpredictable. “No, no, no,” she says, when asked if she can predict next week’s earnings. “It varies. It varies a lot.”

Fatigue is constant. She describes a recent Sunday vividly: starting work at 11:30am, driving until 4:30pm, going home to prepare for Monday, and then forcing herself back out. “I was very tired already,” she says, “but I thought, no, you have to go, Maryan.” She made herself a strong coffee and returned to the car until 10:30pm. When she got home, she still felt “tired… still tired.” She had wanted to work even more, but she

reminded herself: "I have to get up in the morning, and I still have to do motherhood things." This is the reality dynamic pay has created for her: a job that demands late-night hours she cannot afford to give, and a household that depends on energy she no longer has.

The job is also dangerous for her. As a woman working nights, she faces regular harassment. Passengers make comments about her appearance, ask for her number, or question why she is working so late. "Sometimes it feels weird," she says. One recent incident stays with her: a man became angry about the drop-off address and demanded she change it for him while she was alone with him at night. "It's not safe," she says. "Because of that pricing, that's what makes us work at night." She knows other female drivers who face the same struggle: some drive nights because they financially must, others avoid it because the risk is too high. She often wishes she could work the split shifts her friends with older children can but childcare makes that impossible.

Dynamic pay also distorts her routes and reduces her earnings through inaccurate distances and opaque calculations. "You see the pickup point says 0.5 miles," she explains, "but it's more than that. Destination is more than that. Sometimes they cut off the miles… and the payment is still not the same." When she complains, the platform denies it. "They always have the excuse," she says. "They always have the excuse." She takes screenshots now, "you have to take screenshots," she says but even then, she must wait for the same response: sorry, but everything matches. "It's just annoying," she says. "There's no one you can talk to."

The pressure to accept bad jobs is intense. "Sometimes you have to accept," she says. If she refuses too many underpaid jobs, the system slows down her work. "You leave your house, you left your children… you drive around, and it doesn't make sense," she says. "Sometimes it makes you accept something you didn't even want to do." She admits the truth plainly: "Sometimes it's scary. Sometimes you don't have no choice."

The financial strain spills into every corner of her life. When she misses a target, she must borrow money. "You borrow someone and then you pay back when you work more hours the next week," she says. "Everyone is struggling now… everything is really affected by the dynamic price." And the customers know something is wrong. "Sometimes the customer shows you the account, how much they paid," she says. "They say, 'I'm sorry… I didn't know this.'" She often shows her own screen in return. "They're really surprised," she says. "Sometimes they say, 'We should not use these platforms if they don't pay drivers right.'"

Her conclusion is the same at every point in her story: dynamic pay has taken the flexibility that once made the job possible and replaced it with exhaustion, risk, unpredictability, and a schedule entirely shaped by the platform's needs rather than her family's. "It's really affecting me personally," she says. "As a mother. As a daughter. As a lone parent." And yet, despite everything, she tells herself the same thing she tells her children: keep going. "I'm trying to be strong," she repeats. "Every day, I try to be strong."

Case Study 10. Hassan: “I feel poorer.”

Hassan began driving private hire cars in 2006 and returned to the sector in 2019, joining Uber. When he started, he found the work straightforward and the pay transparent. It was clear what the customer was paying and what the driver was receiving. Under the new system of dynamic pricing, however, that transparency has vanished. “They use a lot of accounting tricks”, he explained.

“They'll be like, ‘We've only taken 30 per cent’, and then you'll have 5 per cent for fees or dropouts, things like that. And then you have another 3 per cent as, what they call, a rider promotion. It's not exactly clear… They're making it out like we're partners, both paying for ride promotion, but we're supposed to be workers.”

Before dynamic pricing, Hassan could earn around £1,200 a week; now he earns closer to £900; “if I work really, really hard”. The change has left him unable to plan or spend with confidence. “I feel poorer,” he said, “I can’t afford the things I used to buy”. He has kept careful records of his income through Uber’s app and found that his share of fares, once 75 per cent, now averages between 60 per cent and 66 per cent. “Every few months it may go up to 70 per cent,” he said, but then drops down again the next week.

Further financial strain has come from Uber’s shift toward electric vehicles. The company encouraged drivers to buy cars through hire-purchase schemes, but Hassan’s experience was costly. High mileage degraded the battery of his electric car, forcing him to return it after spending tens of thousands of pounds.

He also pointed to the inclusion of holiday pay within each fare, a change that, in practice, means little. “I can’t really take a day off”, he said.

“There’s nothing coming in… they have designed it in a way where people like me would always have to work. We can't take a week or two off. We are always there. A couple months ago I was sick. I couldn't get paid any sick pay. I couldn't even pay my rent, you know, because it's just, it feels like you have to be on edge, you know, every day you have to be on, otherwise you can't eat.”

Hassan described the mental load of working under dynamic pricing as exhausting. “There’s a sense of information overload so that you can make a decision, a decision good for Uber, not necessarily good for you”, he said. He often received multiple ride requests while driving, sometimes ten or fifteen within minutes, making it impossible to process them safely.

Although drivers are free in theory to reject jobs, in practice Uber monitors their acceptance rate. Hassan recalled receiving calls asking why he wasn't taking more trips, adding further pressure to accept even jobs that are not financially viable for the driver. Age has made it harder for him to manage the longest jobs, but the app's system gives him little control.

Hassan also reflected on the 2021 Supreme Court ruling that confirmed Uber drivers' right to worker status, including holiday and minimum wage entitlements. He felt that Uber had since undermined these rights. "Everything we have won at the Supreme Court, Uber has systematically taken down one thing at a time", he said. "I'm actually very impressed with how they have managed to slowly just chip it away". He observed that the company now seemed to reward drivers only after several consecutive days of work. "It's back-loaded", he said. "The first three, four days, you're going to be making less money than the last three days … to make sure that this person is always on the road".

This perpetual cycle of availability had taken a toll on his health and his personal life. To manage stress, he bought a separate phone for the Uber app. "I would just leave [it] in the car", he said, "whereas before I would have it on my other phone. I could be home relaxing, and then the app is always there … it's like seeing your boss even on your day off." He described his so-called flexibility as "a disaster".

"I can start anytime I want, finish anytime I want…meaning there's no structure… I've been doing nights for so many years to the point where I felt I couldn't go out in the day … and that has really held me back… I feel uncomfortable just walking in the city in the morning."

The long nights, constant availability, and lack of predictability also strained family relationships. "I don't think I would've come back to this job if I knew what I know now", he said. "Now I've got used to this lifestyle, I can't really get out". Attempts to move into other work have failed because of stigma.

"Every time I apply for a job, I have to write I've been doing Uber for seven years. And I've never really had success because I think there's a stigma… a lot people have a bad experience with Uber drivers."

Hassan's story captures how dynamic pricing has eroded income stability, blurred the boundary between work and rest, and undermined the legal protections drivers fought to win. His comparison of Uber drivers to "on-demand TV" encapsulates a workforce kept constantly available yet denied real security; a stark illustration of how algorithmic management can turn supposed flexibility into dependency and fatigue.

Case Study 11. Simo (pseudonym): “It’s not clear how much the company is taking.”

Simo, a man in his 20s, has been working as a food delivery rider in the Midlands for several years. When he first began, the work was straightforward and the pay relatively decent. At the start, you could earn “two or three times more” the amount possible now, he said. Dynamic pay, introduced gradually by the major delivery platforms, transformed what had once seemed like flexible self-employment into a source of uncertainty and financial stress.

He described the steep decline in earnings as the single most significant change. “Especially if they’re providing for someone,” he said, “they're pretty miserable because they're working every day. They wake up, they have to go deliver and then by the time it's night … you're cold freezing, you come home and then you have about £80, £90 and … they're really struggling”. What had initially been portrayed as a system of freedom and choice became one of relentless necessity. “If you're just on one app or two apps, it's not enough… You are competing with everyone else as well”, he explained.

To make ends meet, Simo and many of his peers now work across multiple platforms simultaneously, a strategy called multi-apping. But doing so creates its own pressures: riders must constantly monitor several phones, accept jobs quickly to maintain high acceptance rates, and juggle overlapping deliveries.

The unpredictability of pay was compounded by opacity. “It’s not clear how much the company is taking,” he explained. “A lot of people … tried their own systems that can calculate their pay … and that can tell them … if they're being paid enough per order”. Yet even those efforts rarely bring clarity.

He also described a mismatch between promised and actual pay. “It's not what they are being told”, he said, “it varies a lot specifically with demand and traffic and stuff. If you have any lost time on the order, you are not compensated for it. If you're waiting in traffic and the order is late, it's not your fault, then you could be penalised for it.” This constant discrepancy between the official rate and real pay created frustration and suspicion that the algorithm was not operating in the workers’ favour.

The cumulative effect of falling pay and hidden calculations has been longer hours and greater exhaustion. Simo recalled how sometimes you see thirty or more riders waiting in the cold for orders to be offered. He explains how in these situations people become desperate, and take jobs that do not make sense, just to earn something. To escape the competition, he began working early mornings, when “there's not many riders due to being cold, especially on the bikes”.

Pushing work into the night time and forcing riders to be on the streets for more of the day has brought new safety risks. “There’s a lot of people stealing bikes, coming up with knives and taking the bike”, he said. Racist abuse from customers and passers-by added to the strain. These dangers prompted Simo to switch from a bicycle to a car, but the change brought new expenses in fuel, maintenance, and insurance that eroded any financial gain.

Simo’s account captures how dynamic pricing combines economic insecurity with physical danger. Lower rates push riders to extend their working hours, while algorithmic opacity leaves them uncertain of what they will earn on any given day. The supposed flexibility of gig work becomes a form of dependency, where survival requires constant vigilance and self-exploitation.

Conclusion

Dynamic pay is becoming the dominant wage-setting mechanism in much platform work and is poised to spread through other sectors from care work to hospitality to logistics.[7] But as the case studies above show:

- It undermines wage security.
- It redistributes business risk from employers to workers.
- It disadvantages a group of workers who are disproportionally Black and Minority Ethnic and already bear structural disadvantage in the labour market. [8]
- And it places a particular disadvantage on women who continue to bear the bulk of caring responsibilities and are more likely to be limited to working at certain times.

One approach is to challenge dynamic pricing in the courts. To this end, Worker Info Exchange has started collective legal action, challenging Uber's use of dynamic pay on behalf of drivers in the UK, the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe.[9] Drawing on evidence from data access requests and analysis of driver earnings, the action argues that Uber's algorithmic wage-setting is non-transparent and in breach of drivers' data rights. The claim seeks transparency and redress for loss of income drivers have experienced since the rollout of dynamic pay.

Separately, and more broadly, trade unions are working hard in the workplace to establish better conditions for workers. TUC affiliate, the GMB, has secured agreements with the likes of Uber and Deliveroo. With the government boosting trade unions' rights of access and removing some of the hurdles to recognition, there is the potential for unions to achieve significant improvements to workers' conditions via workplace organisation.

However, there must also be government action to raise minimum standards in the workplace and to better arm unions to bargain effectively for better terms and conditions.

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[8] CIPD (September 2023). *The gig economy: what does it really look like?,* CIPD www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/2023-cipd-gig-economy-report-8453.pdf

[9] Worker Info Exchange (20 November 2025). *Drivers in UK and Europe set to sue Uber for unfair pay set by algorithm* www.workerinfoexchange.org/post/drivers-in-uk-and-europe-set-to-sue-uber-for-unfair-pay-set-by-algorithm

The government's *Plan to Make Work Pay*[10] has led to the passing of the Employment Rights Act 2025 that will raise standards for some low-paid and insecure workers. It will give variable-hours workers guaranteed hours contracts and bring more employees within the scope of unfair dismissal protection. The Act will also boost workers' ability to act collectively by giving unions a right to access workplaces to talk to workers, removing some of the barriers to union recognition and deleting anti-union measures introduced by previous governments.

But more needs to be done. The Employment Rights Act should be the first step towards bringing in wider protections: ensuring that rights to fair pay, predictable work, and meaningful enforcement remain effective in sectors where wages are increasingly determined by automated systems.

European developments offer important comparative lessons. The EU Platform Work Directive demonstrates that it is possible to legislate directly on algorithmic management by requiring transparency, data protections, and human oversight. The EU AI Act takes a similar step by classifying employment-related AI as "high risk."

Dynamic pay could, in principle, be addressed through narrower interventions, such as transparency duties, minimum pay floors, or limits on variable take rates. The evidence in this report indicates why such measures are unlikely to be sufficient on their own in platform labour markets characterised by unpaid waiting time, oversupply, and individualised pricing. When there is no stable wage object to bargain over, and when net pay can be personalised and changed without notice, enforcement and collective bargaining struggle to stabilise earnings or constrain downward pressure. On that basis, this report argues that ending dynamic pay-setting is necessary to restore a pay model that can be collectively negotiated and effectively enforced.

We propose three key steps that government should take to safeguard workers:

1. Ending dynamic pay

The TUC urges the government to take steps to end the use of dynamic pay altogether before the end of the current parliament in 2029.

Regulators in the UK and elsewhere are already taking an interest in the use of dynamic pricing for consumer goods and services after some anger over its use for concert tickets, in particular.[11]

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[10] Labour Party (May 2024). *Labour's Plan to Make Work Pay.* https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/MakeWorkPay.pdf

[11] Savage, M. (25 March 2025). "Oasis sale 'may have misled fans' says watchdog" *BBC News website* www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cddy85n57j8o; Wells, K. et al (9 December 2025). *Same Cart, Different Price: Instacart's Price Experiments Cost Families at Checkout* https://groundworkcollaborative.org/work/instacart/

In other countries, notably the United States, there have been proposals tabled for laws to govern dynamic pay.[12]

The UK's Competition and Markets Authority warned in summer 2025 that it is more likely to be concerned about the use of dynamic pricing for goods and services when:

- consumers are unaware that dynamic pricing is being used or how it may affect prices so cannot make informed choices
- consumers feel pressured to make quick decisions because prices may rise suddenly
- vulnerable consumers are particularly disadvantaged such that they pay higher prices than others
- dynamic pricing is used to obtain or maintain market power or reduce new entry in a market, which results in higher prices, lower output and harm to consumers, businesses and the UK economy.[13]

Although the CMA's approach is framed around consumer harm, its criteria are relevant here because dynamic pay reproduces the same information asymmetries and time pressure within labour markets, where the consequences fall on workers' earnings and health rather than on consumers' prices alone. Workers have a short time to decide whether to take a job. Those who most need work are more likely to accept low-paid jobs. And the case studies above make it clear the harm being done to workers. This confirms the need for urgent government action.

But the UK is yet to make any legislative changes in response to the use of dynamic pricing in consumer services.

There is also a blind spot among policymakers when it comes to the use of dynamic pay. The CMA actually cites dynamic pricing in ride hailing as a positive because "fare increases at times of high demand may encourage more drivers onto the road". This overlooks the broader context in which ride hailing is being used to drive down pay and increase insecurity among platform workers.

Outside the UK, some authorities have already taken steps to deal with dynamic pricing. Online shoppers in New York are now warned when checking out: "This price was set by an algorithm using your personal data." If a business uses personal consumer data in an algorithm to determine specific prices, it now needs to disclose it.[14]

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[12] For example "Prohibit Surveillance Data to Set Prices and Wages" https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb25-1264; Senate Bill 164 www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20252026/232348

[13] Competition and Markets Authority (20 June 2025). *Update: dynamic pricing* www.gov.uk/government/publications/dynamic-pricing-project-update/update-dynamic-pricing

[14] Sircar A. (3 December 2025). "How New York's First-In-Nation AI Pricing Law Affects Your Wallet". *Forbes* www.forbes.com/sites/anishasircar/2025/12/03/new-yorks-algorithmic-pricing-law-what-it-does-and-why-it-matters/

But transparency rules of this nature concerning dynamic pay would do little to protect workers. There is little sign that workers do not know that dynamic pricing is being used. Rather, the dynamics in the workplace give them little option for balancing the additional power this gives the platform that allocates them work.

Take Uber. When it first launched, Uber presented a simple payment model to drivers that was familiar in the private hire market. Pay was based on a flat rate per mile and per minute, and Uber took a fixed commission.

It has become increasingly complex with Uber introducing upfront fares based on its prediction of duration and distance. Commission payments have changed. And now dynamic pricing has come in.

Drivers who signed up in earlier waves of recruitment, even if they didn't know exactly what jobs they'd get, could at least know how pay is calculated. Now workers continuously gamble, never sure how much cut Uber is taking.

This is not something that is easily resolved, even through collective bargaining. How can a union negotiate over a pay rate when there is no pay rate?

Before dynamic pay spreads further through the economy, the government should take steps to halt its use. This means returning to a system where private hire and delivery workers are paid according to time and distance and the platform takes a consistent cut of the revenues. We believe that personalised pricing should be forbidden to stop platforms exploiting the most vulnerable workers. The TUC urges the government to urgently open a consultation on how to implement these changes in the most effective manner and to bring forward legislation before the end of this parliament.

2. Employment status

The need to protect the introduction of additional rights under the Employment Rights Act, coupled with the spread of dynamic pay, means the government must move quickly to meet its commitment to reform the existing complex and ineffective system of employment status.[15]

The government has already committed that it will "move towards a single status of worker and transition towards a simpler two-part framework for employment status".[16] It intends to undertake a consultation on the issue.

It has also pledged that: "We will ensure workers in precarious and gig-economy sectors have a meaningful right to organise through trade unions, modernising rules to ensure they are fit for an economy with growing platform sectors and a rise in remote and home working."

[15] The Labour Party (2024). *Labour's Plan to Make Work Pay*

Whether someone has employment protections is dependent on them being deemed a worker or employee. This can include rights to the minimum wage and protection from unfair dismissal.

But too many employers tell their staff that they are self-employed. That some platforms allow workers to substitute someone else to do their work on occasion has been interpreted by the courts as designating self-employee status.[17] This means that someone who meets all the other criteria for worker status[18] and whose platform employer expects them to perform their duties personally on the vast majority of occasions, can find themselves declared self-employed and ineligible for worker protections. The introduction of the Employment Rights Act increases the incentive for employers to claim workers are actually self-employed and aren't entitled to employment protections.

Platform workers find themselves repeatedly turning to the courts to establish that they have worker status and therefore key employment rights, including the right to be paid the national minimum wage.[19] There is also continued uncertainty on whether workers such as drivers and delivery riders are legally entitled to be paid the minimum wage during waiting time. Enforcing the inclusion of waiting time in minimum wage calculations is necessary to remove the incentive for platforms to over-recruit, leaving workers without sufficient work to make a living. This is of particular importance currently given that dynamic pricing appears to have increased waiting times, which under current arrangements reduces real pay per hour. Perversely, this reduced pay per house creates pressure to work longer hours, which further increases over-supply in a vicious cycle.

Worker status is also necessary for workers seeking to secure a statutory union recognition, which is not available to self-employed workers.

The TUC urges the government to move quickly to introduce reforms to employment status, alongside the implementation of the Employment Rights Act.

This means bringing more platform workers and other workers in insecure forms of work within the scope of worker status. This could be achieved by reforming the law around substitution clauses to ensure that a worker who performs personally *any* work or services meets the personal work test for worker status. In addition, when a case

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[17] Supreme Court (2021). Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (Appellant) v Central Arbitration Committee and another (Respondents) https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2021-0155

[18] Acas. *Employment status: worker* www.acas.org.uk/employment-status/worker-employment-status

[19] For example, Supreme Court (2021). Uber BV and others (Appellants) v Aslam and others (Respondents) https://supremecourt.uk/uploads/uksc_2019_0029_judgment_19c9de2253.pdf; Torre, B. (20 November 2024). "Bolt drivers to get £15,000 each in legal win that 'goes further' than Uber case" Morning Star https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/h-2nd-bolt-drivers-get-%C2%A315000-each-legal-win-goes-further-uber-case

goes to an employment tribunal there should be an assumption of worker status unless an employer can prove otherwise.

There should also be clarity over the right of workers to paid for waiting times. Dynamic pricing relies on having large numbers of workers waiting around for free.

A key part of the solution is also effective enforcement. The Employment Rights Act establishes a new Fair Work Agency (FWA) that combines a number of labour market enforcement authorities, making it a 'one-stop-shop' for workers' rights. The FWA is being granted powers to be able to take claims to an employment tribunal on behalf of workers. This could help to allow for strategic interventions, particularly where an employer is systemically violating workers' rights. In this sense, the FWA could challenge employers who are miscategorising their workers, for instance, as self-employed.

The FWA should take a proactive role in assessing and determining worker status. As worker status determines the employment rights and entitlements that's available to workers, the ability to decide on worker status will be central to the FWA's power to carry out its enforcement functions.

Both of these roles require the FWA to be adequately resourced.

Meanwhile, UK legislation should ensure that self-employed workers are properly compensated for the data they generate that platforms use to develop the algorithms underpinning their business and pricing models. As it stands, UK platform workers receive no payment for the use of their personal data. The Government should address this by ensuring that platform operators are required to negotiate collective micro-payment for using this information.

3. Collective data rights

As it stands, workers in the platform economy are often in a weak bargaining position. Trade union membership, as elsewhere in the private sector, is low. Workers are geographically spread, making recruitment expensive and difficult. Meanwhile, key management functions are carried out by algorithms rather than human managers.

Giving unions the right to talk to workers, both directly and via digital means, under the Employment Rights Act, is one means to enhance worker power.

But it is only when workers have access to information that platforms use to determine pay and make other decisions and the ability to act collectively in response to those data that workers will be able to ensure that they are being treated fairly.

The TUC's draft Artificial Intelligence (Regulation and Employment) Bill[20] sets out a set of collective data rights. This includes requiring a trade union to be provided with all

[20] TUC (2024). *Artificial Intelligence (Regulation and Employment) Bill* www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/artificial-intelligence-regulation-and-employment-rights-bill

the data collected by an employer that relates to its members that is used or is proposed to be used by the employer for artificial intelligence decision-making.

The implementation of this aspect of the draft Bill should be an immediate priority for the government. This would allow unions to build the material to negotiate on wage-setting while the government is consulting on measures to end the use of dynamic pay setting and afterwards to ensure that workers secure a fair deal.

Legislation is essential to raise the floor and provide certainty for workers and businesses alike. Pending this, other policy tools are available that address the data related harms of dynamic pricing.

First, the Information Commissioner's Office must robustly enforce existing data rights and expedite the development of a statutory Code of Practice on Automated Decision Making (ADM), of which dynamic pricing is an example.[21] Second, the government should accelerate the delivery of the commitment set out in its *Plan to Make Work Pay* to "ensure that proposals to introduce surveillance technologies would be subject to consultation and negotiation, with a view to agreement of trade unions or elected staff representatives where there is no trade union".[22]

[21] Information Commissioner's Office (2025). *Our plan of action* https://ico.org.uk/about-the-ico/our-information/our-strategies-and-plans/artificial-intelligence-and-biometrics-strategy/our-plan-of-action/

[22] Labour Party (2024). *Plan to Make Work Pay* https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/MakeWorkPay.pdf