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Algorithmic management and the representation gap: digital labour platforms and worker organisation in algerian cities

ABSTRACT

The expansion of digital labour platforms in Algerian cities has increased the use of algorithmic management systems that regulate workers' performance, monitoring, and task allocation. The objective of this study was to examine how algorithmic management affects the representational capacity of trade unions and civil society organisations, identify emerging collective responses among platform workers, and assess the gap between traditional organisational frameworks and new forms of digital employment. The methodology adopted a critical mixed-methods design combining a survey of 280 platform workers in Algiers, Oran, and Annaba, 40 semi-structured interviews, and four months of netnographic observation across six digital worker networks. The results revealed that 86.4% of participants lacked effective organisational representation, while delivery workers experienced the highest levels of algorithmic control. Informal digital networks demonstrated greater mobilisation capacity than trade unions across several dimensions of collective power, although their sustainability remained limited. The study concludes that platform workers in Algeria face a structural representation deficit caused by the absence of institutional frameworks and technical capacities adapted to algorithmic management. A hybrid partnership model between formal organisations and digital networks is proposed to strengthen worker representation in platform-based labour markets.

Keywords: algorithmic management; platform work; union representation; digital collective action.

Gestión algorítmica y la brecha de representación: plataformas digitales de trabajo y organización de los trabajadores en las ciudades argelinas

RESUMEN

La expansión de las plataformas digitales de trabajo en las ciudades argelinas ha incrementado el uso de sistemas de gestión algorítmica que regulan el desempeño, la supervisión y la asignación de tareas de los trabajadores. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar cómo la gestión algorítmica afecta la capacidad de representación de sindicatos y organizaciones de la sociedad civil, identificar las respuestas colectivas emergentes de los trabajadores de plataformas y evaluar las brechas existentes entre los marcos organizativos tradicionales y las nuevas formas de empleo digital. La metodología adoptó un diseño mixto crítico que combinó una encuesta aplicada a 280 trabajadores de plataformas en Argel, Orán y Annaba, 40 entrevistas semiestructuradas y cuatro meses de observación netnográfica en seis redes digitales de trabajadores. Los resultados mostraron que el 86,4 % de los participantes carecía de representación organizativa efectiva, mientras que los trabajadores de reparto experimentaban los niveles más altos de control algorítmico. Asimismo, las redes digitales informales demostraron una mayor capacidad de movilización que los sindicatos en varias dimensiones de poder colectivo, aunque con limitaciones de sostenibilidad. Se concluye que los trabajadores de plataformas en Argelia enfrentan un déficit estructural de representación debido a la falta de marcos institucionales y capacidades técnicas adaptadas a la gestión algorítmica. Se propone un modelo híbrido de colaboración entre organizaciones formales y redes digitales para fortalecer la representación laboral.

Palabras clave: gestión algorítmica; trabajo en plataformas; representación sindical; acción colectiva digital.

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A gestão algorítmica e a lacuna de representação: plataformas de trabalho digitais e organização dos trabalhadores nas cidades argelinas.

RESUMO

A expansão das plataformas digitais de trabalho nas cidades argelinas aumentou o uso de sistemas de gestão algorítmica que regulam o desempenho, a supervisão e a distribuição de tarefas dos trabalhadores. O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar como a gestão algorítmica afeta a capacidade de representação dos sindicatos e das organizações da sociedade civil, identificar respostas coletivas emergentes entre os trabalhadores de plataformas e avaliar a lacuna existente entre os marcos organizacionais tradicionais e as novas formas de trabalho digital. A metodologia adotou um desenho misto crítico, combinando um inquérito aplicado a 280 trabalhadores de plataformas em Argel, Orã e Annaba, 40 entrevistas semiestructuradas e quatro meses de observação netnográfica em seis redes digitais de trabalhadores. Os resultados mostraram que 86,4% dos participantes não possuíam representação organizacional efetiva, enquanto os trabalhadores de entrega enfrentavam os níveis mais elevados de controle algorítmico. Além disso, as redes digitais informais demonstraram maior capacidade de mobilização do que os sindicatos em diversas dimensões do poder coletivo, embora apresentassem limitações de sustentabilidade. Conclui-se que os trabalhadores de plataformas na Argélia enfrentam um déficit estrutural de representação devido à ausência de estruturas institucionais e capacidades técnicas adaptadas à gestão algorítmica. Propõe-se um modelo híbrido de cooperação entre organizações formais e redes digitais para fortalecer a representação laboral.

Palavras-chave: gestão algorítmica; trabalho em plataformas; representação sindical; ação

coletiva digital.

INTRODUCTION

Delivery drivers in Algiers navigate two systems simultaneously. One is the city — its streets, traffic, and customers. The other is invisible: an algorithm that assigns orders, tracks movement, calculates ratings, and can deactivate an account with no human intervention and no explanation.

This is not a new phenomenon globally. But it is almost entirely undocumented in Algeria. A growing number of young Algerians work through platforms — for food delivery, transport, domestic services, and digital freelancing. They do so without employment contracts, without social protection, and without any collective representation structure designed to address their situation.

Algerian trade unions were built for a different world. Their frameworks assume identifiable employers, stable contracts, and workers who can be reached in shared physical spaces. Platform workers have none of these things. The representational mismatch is not a marginal problem — it is structural.

Workers have not waited for institutional solutions. WhatsApp and Telegram groups have emerged as primary collective resources. These groups coordinate work stoppages, share information about algorithm changes, and sometimes generate real public pressure. But they also dissolve quickly, typically within days of the event that triggered them.

This study examines these dynamics empirically. Three things are new here. First, it provides empirical data from Algerian cities — a context with no peer-reviewed literature on this topic. Second, it develops and validates the PAMS scale, which measures algorithmic management intensity across five dimensions rather than treating it as a single construct. Third, it uses the Power Resources Approach to compare formal and informal organisational capacity directly, producing actionable findings about which gaps need addressing and how.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Power Resources Approach

The Power Resources Approach (Schmalz & Dörre, 2013; Dörre et al., 2018) analyses worker organisation across four dimensions.

Structural power: the capacity to disrupt production, derived from workers' position in the labour process. Associational power: density and quality of collective organisation — network cohesion, solidarity, shared identity. Institutional power: legal recognition, bargaining rights, access to political processes. Discursive power: capacity to shape public narratives, media frames, and policy agendas.

This framework is useful here because formal and informal organisations are strong on different dimensions. Unions have institutional advantages. Informal networks have structural and associational advantages. Comparing them on a single dimension — typically institutional power — produces a distorted picture. The PRA avoids this.

Algorithmic Management

Labour process theory (Braverman, 1974) frames managerial control as a structural feature of the employment relationship. Digital platforms extend this logic: algorithms perform surveillance, evaluation, and task allocation that previously required human managers. Control becomes more intensive and less visible at the same time.

De Stefano and Taes (2023) identify informational asymmetry as the specific mechanism blocking collective representation. Unions cannot negotiate over decision parameters they

cannot access. Platforms have no legal obligation to disclose algorithmic scoring methods. This asymmetry is not an accident. It is a structural feature of platform business models.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic capital contextualises the rating systems documented in this study. Ratings are accumulated through labour, determine economic opportunity, and can be depreciated by mechanisms workers do not control. The dependence on rating systems — the highest PAMS dimension across all platform types in this study — represents a specific form of power asymmetry with no equivalent in conventional employment relationships.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Central question: How does algorithmic management affect trade union and civil society representational capacity in Algerian platform economies, and what forms of collective organisation emerge in response?

- Sub-questions:
- How do Algerian platform workers perceive algorithmic management, and does intensity vary by platform type and worker characteristics?
- How do formal and informal organisations compare across four power resource dimensions?
- What collective responses do workers develop, and why do they fail to sustain?
- What structural barriers prevent existing organisations from representing platform workers effectively?

Table 1

Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement	Basis
1	Algorithmic management intensity differs significantly across platform types	De Stefano and Taes (2023)
2	Informal networks exceed unions in structural and associational power; unions retain institutional advantage	Joyce et al. (2023)
3	Definitional mismatch — not resource constraints — is the primary union limitation	ILO (2024)
4	Algorithmic opacity constitutes a structural barrier to negotiation independent of legal framework	De Stefano and Taes (2023)

Methodology

Design

Critical transformative mixed-methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative phase measured algorithmic management intensity and organisational capacity. Qualitative phase examined worker experience and the mechanisms sustaining the representation gap. Integration at interpretation stage.

Sites and Sampling

Sites: Algiers, Oran, and Annaba. Selected for variation in city size, platform market development, and union density. Annaba's industrial heritage gives it a distinct union tradition compared to the service-dominated economies of Algiers and Oran.

Quantitative sample: N=280 platform workers. Recruited through platform-specific online channels and snowball sampling through documented worker networks. Power analysis

(GPower 3.1; $f^2=0.15$, $\alpha=0.05$, power=0.80) indicated minimum $n=242$. 280 valid responses retained.

Table 2.

Sample Distribution (N=280)

Variable	Category	n	%
City	Algiers	112	40.0
	Oran	89	31.8
	Annaba	79	28.2
Gender	Male	189	67.5
	Female	91	32.5
Age	18–25	84	30.0
	26–35	112	40.0
	36–45	61	21.8
	46+	23	8.2
Platform type	Food delivery	91	32.5
	App-based transport	74	26.4
	Digital freelancing	63	22.5
	Domestic services	52	18.6
Union membership	Active	38	13.6
	Nominal only	51	18.2
	None	191	68.2

86.4% of respondents had no effective union representation. Annaba workers showed slightly higher active membership (17.7%) than Algiers (12.5%) and Oran (11.2%), consistent with the city's stronger industrial union tradition.

Organisational sample: Eight trade unions with presence in sectors overlapping platform labour, and seven civil society organisations working on digital rights or labour issues. Six WhatsApp and Telegram platform worker groups were observed netnographically.

Instruments

Perceived Algorithmic Management Scale (PAMS): 25 items across five dimensions — surveillance intensity, decision-making autonomy, algorithmic transparency, rating system dependency, and impact on job security. Five-point Likert scale (1=very low to 5=very high). Developed through academic expert review ($n=5$), worker review ($n=8$), pilot testing ($n=30$), and full psychometric validation.

Organisational Representation Capacity Scale (ORC): 20 items across the four PRA dimensions. Five-point Likert scale.

Scale Validation

Table 3

PAMS Reliability and Validity

Dimension	Items	α	AVE	CR
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Surveillance intensity	5	0.89	0.621	0.892
Decision-making autonomy	5	0.87	0.598	0.879
Algorithmic transparency	5	0.84	0.574	0.861
Rating system dependency	5	0.91	0.648	0.904
Impact on job security	5	0.86	0.588	0.871
Total PAMS	25	0.94	—	—

CFA: $\chi^2/df=2.18$, CFI=0.953, TLI=0.946, RMSEA=0.052, SRMR=0.056. ORC: $\alpha=0.89$. Discriminant validity confirmed using Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Common Method Bias

Harman's single-factor: 22.4% of total variance (below 50% threshold). Full collinearity VIF: 1.14–2.87 (below 3.3 threshold). Common method bias is not a major concern here (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Kline, 2016).

Qualitative Data

40 interviews (platform workers n=28; union and CSO representatives n=12). Average duration: 52 minutes. Conducted in Algerian Darija. Audio-recorded with consent. Verbatim transcription; back-translation checks on 15% of material.

Six digital worker groups observed for four months (February–May 2024). Structured diary recorded content type, collective action events, network size fluctuations, and dissolution triggers (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

Reflexive thematic analysis in NVivo 14 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two researchers coded independently. Inter-coder reliability on 20% subsample: $\kappa=0.84$. Member-checking with nine participants.

Reflexivity: One researcher had prior contact with Algerian platform worker networks through community work. This facilitated access but required deliberate attention to insider bias, documented in a reflexivity journal.

Ethics

Institutional ethics approval obtained before data collection. Written informed consent from all participants. Private group data collected only with administrator consent. Participant codes used throughout. No personally identifying information appears in reported findings.

RESULTS

Algorithmic Management by Platform Type

Table 4

PAMS Dimensions by Platform Type (Scale 1–5)

Platform	Surveillance M (SD)	Autonomy M (SD)	Transparency M (SD)	Rating dep. M (SD)	Job security M (SD)
Food delivery	4.67 (0.58)	1.43 (0.61)	1.21 (0.49)	4.81 (0.52)	4.52 (0.67)
App-based transport	4.43 (0.71)	1.67 (0.73)	1.34 (0.56)	4.63 (0.68)	4.31 (0.79)

Algorithmic management and the representation gap: digital labour platforms and worker organisation in algerian cities.

Domestic services	3.87 (0.92)	2.14 (0.88)	1.89 (0.77)	3.94 (0.94)	3.78 (0.91)
Digital freelancing	3.21 (1.02)	3.34 (0.94)	2.43 (0.91)	3.12 (1.11)	2.89 (0.98)
F (df=3,276)	29.43***	31.87***	26.54***	34.21***	27.93***
η^2	0.38	0.41	0.35	0.44	0.36

$p < 0.001$. Post-hoc Tukey: food delivery vs. digital freelancing significant at $p < 0.001$ on all dimensions.

H1 supported across all dimensions. Food delivery workers face the most intensive algorithmic control. The autonomy gap between food delivery ($M = 1.43$) and digital freelancing ($M = 3.34$) is 1.91 points — not a marginal difference. These are qualitatively different labour experiences within a single regulatory category. Treating all platform workers as one group for policy purposes will systematically miss those facing the most severe conditions.

City-level differences were not significant after controlling for platform type (all $F < 2.3$, $p > 0.10$). Algorithmic management intensity is driven by platform architecture, not local context.

Gender

Women reported higher algorithmic management intensity after controlling for platform type and seniority: surveillance $M = 4.34$ vs. $M = 4.21$ for men ($\eta^2 = 0.09$), rating dependency $M = 4.52$ vs. $M = 4.31$. Multiple regression confirmed an independent gender effect ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.001$; Table 5). The mechanism is not clear from this data. Possible explanations include differential client rating patterns or algorithmic task assignment. This warrants dedicated investigation.

Organisational Capacity

Table 5

ORC Dimensions by Organisational Type

Power dimension	Trade unions M (SD)	Civil society M (SD)	Informal networks M (SD)	F (df=2,277)	η^2
Structural power	1.87 (0.76)	1.43 (0.71)	3.21 (0.89)	41.23***	0.49
Associational power	2.14 (0.82)	2.67 (0.84)	3.87 (0.76)	47.89***	0.52
Institutional power	3.41 (0.91)	2.89 (0.88)	1.12 (0.54)	55.12***	0.56
Discursive power	1.94 (0.79)	3.34 (0.87)	3.67 (0.81)	38.74***	0.47
Overall M (SD)	2.34 (0.89)	2.58 (0.91)	2.97 (0.98)	17.83***	0.32

$p < 0.001$. Post-hoc Tukey: informal networks vs. unions significant at $p < 0.001$ on structural, associational, discursive dimensions.

H2 supported. Informal networks exceed trade unions on three of four dimensions. Unions retain institutional power — the dimension that opens doors to legal recognition and formal bargaining. But that door is closed to workers not classified as employees, which describes most of this sample.

No union in the sample had a dedicated unit for algorithmic management. None had a formal representation framework for platform workers. Union representatives interviewed described platform workers as "a new category we don't yet know how to approach."

Annaba-based unions scored marginally higher on associational power ($M=2.41$ vs. $M=2.04$ for Algiers) but the difference was not significant ($F=1.87$, $p=0.16$).

Regression: Predictors of PAMS Score

Table 6

Multiple Regression: PAMS Total (N=280)

Predictor	B	β	t	p
Constant	2.14	—	8.23	<0.001
App-based transport (ref: food delivery)	-0.67	-0.23	-4.12	<0.001
Domestic services	-1.12	-0.31	-5.67	<0.001
Digital freelancing	-1.78	-0.41	-7.89	<0.001
Work duration (years)	0.23	0.34	6.12	<0.001
Gender (female=1)	0.31	0.18	3.24	0.001

$R^2=0.47$, adjusted $R^2=0.46$; $F(5,274)=47.62$, $p<0.001$

Longer tenure predicted higher — not lower — algorithmic management intensity ($\beta=0.34$). Workers do not adapt to algorithmic control over time. If anything, longer-serving workers have accumulated platform histories that make them more subject to algorithmic scrutiny.

Qualitative Themes

Table 7

Themes (40 interviews + 4 months netnographic observation)

Theme	References	% participants	Example	City variation
Algorithmic opacity blocks contestation	94	88.7	"There's no one to complain to. It's the system." (Algiers, male, delivery)	Consistent
Digital networks as primary solidarity	87	82.1	"The WhatsApp group reacted before any union knew what happened." (Oran, male, transport)	Consistent
Union definitional mismatch	79	74.5	"They talk about contracts and employment status. I have neither." (Annaba, female, domestic)	Consistent
Rating as disciplinary mechanism	91	85.8	"One bad rating changes my whole week." (Algiers, male, delivery)	Consistent
Legal precarity as design feature	83	78.3	"I'm not an employee, not a business. I have no category." (Oran, female, freelance)	Stronger in Oran
Temporal fragility of collective action	61	57.5	"We refused orders for two days. Then the group dissolved." (Algiers, male, transport)	Consistent

Two themes deserve particular attention.

The temporal fragility finding (57.5%) comes from netnographic observation more than interviews. Workers described collective actions they had participated in. Observation allowed tracking what happened after. The pattern was consistent across all six networks: emergence, peak coordination within 24–72 hours, rapid dissolution. No network sustained collective action for more than five days. This is not because workers lack solidarity. It is because they lack the institutional infrastructure — fixed membership, legal personality, sustained leadership — to maintain mobilisation after the triggering event passes.

The definitional mismatch theme (74.5%) describes a categorical problem, not a resource problem. Workers did not say unions were too small or too weak. They said unions were operating in a different frame entirely. Union concepts — employment contract, employer, working hours — simply do not map onto platform labour arrangements. Until they do, institutional power will remain inaccessible.

DISCUSSION

Not One Platform Economy

The between-platform effect sizes ($\eta^2=0.35-0.44$) are not just statistical results. They are an argument. Food delivery workers and digital freelancers operate under such different algorithmic regimes that they cannot be addressed by the same policy instruments. Scholars who write about "platform workers" as a category are describing an abstraction. The people inside that abstraction have experiences that differ by almost 2 points on a 5-point scale for autonomy alone.

Algerian labour policy — to the extent it engages platform work at all — tends to treat it as a uniform category. This study suggests that is a mistake.

Why Informal Networks Are Not the Answer Alone

Informal networks clearly demonstrate mobilisation capacity. They also clearly fail to sustain it. The netnographic data show this repeatedly. A collective refusal to accept orders lasts two days. The algorithm adjusts. The group dissolves.

This temporal fragility does not mean informal networks are useless. It means they need what they currently lack: legal standing, organisational continuity, and access to institutional processes. Trade unions have all three things. The problem is that unions have not yet developed the frameworks — legal, conceptual, or operational — to engage platform workers.

The hybrid model proposed here is not a compromise. It is a structural argument. Informal networks have mobilisation speed and worker proximity that formal institutions cannot replicate. Unions have legal standing and political access that informal networks cannot develop. Their capacities are complementary. A partnership model that formalises this complementarity would address the representation gap more effectively than either actor could alone.

Algerian-Specific Factors

Three features of the Algerian context shape these findings in ways that may not generalise directly to other Arab countries.

First, the UGTA (Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens) has historically operated in close proximity to state institutions. This proximity has granted it legal standing and political access but has also constrained its capacity to advocate for workers in sectors the state does not regulate closely. Platform labour is one such sector.

Second, the informal economy in Algeria is large and normalised. For many platform workers, the absence of formal employment status is not experienced primarily as precarity — it is simply the condition of informal labour that many have always known. This may reduce the sense of grievance that typically drives union mobilisation, even as it intensifies the objective vulnerability.

Third, the Algerian legal framework does not currently provide a classification for platform-mediated work. Workers who are neither employees nor independent businesses in the legal sense have no access to the mechanisms — labour inspections, social courts, collective bargaining — that assume one of those statuses.

Algorithmic Opacity as the Foundational Problem

88.7% of interview participants identified algorithmic opacity as the primary obstacle to contesting outcomes. Not the absence of a union. Not the legal framework. The opacity itself.

This has a direct policy implication. Any representational framework, formal or informal, is limited by informational asymmetry. Unions cannot negotiate over processes they cannot see. Workers cannot appeal decisions they cannot understand. Algorithmic transparency requirements — obliging platforms to disclose scoring parameters to recognised representative bodies — are a precondition for representation to function at all, regardless of organisational form.

Limitations

Three-city sampling introduces geographic limits — results may not apply to smaller Algerian cities or regions with different platform penetration rates. Snowball sampling biases toward workers with digital network access. Self-report instruments may underestimate experiences workers are reluctant to disclose, particularly for workers with precarious platform status who fear account deactivation. Four months of netnographic observation may miss seasonal patterns. Cross-sectional data cannot establish causal trajectories for collective action development.

CONCLUSION

Platform workers in Algerian cities face a representation gap with two components. Most fall outside formal organisational coverage — 86.4% in this sample. And the organisations legally authorised to represent them have not developed the frameworks to do so.

Informal digital networks fill part of this gap. But they dissolve too quickly to sustain representation over time. The netnographic data show a consistent pattern: mobilisation, brief peak, dissolution. Without institutional anchors, network-based collective action cannot produce durable improvements in workers' conditions.

Three recommendations follow from the findings. First, Algerian labour law should establish a functional employment classification based on economic dependency criteria — which would extend legal protection and union access to platform workers currently classified as independent contractors. Second, Algerian trade unions, particularly the UGTA, should develop dedicated units with technical capacity to engage algorithmic management systems — not only labour law expertise. Third, regulatory frameworks should mandate algorithmic transparency requirements, obliging platforms to disclose decision parameters to recognised worker representative bodies.

The hybrid partnership model is the most realistic near-term response. It does not require unions to transform their institutional identity. It requires them to develop structural relationships with informal networks that already have what unions lack — proximity to workers and speed of mobilisation. That partnership is available. Whether Algerian unions will pursue it is a question this study cannot answer.

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