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All India Gig Workers' Union

'FUTURE OF WORK' OR 21ST-CENTURY OPPRESSED LABOUR

**Findings from an AIGWU Survey with 50 Urban
Company housekeeping workers in Bengaluru**

Nihira Ram





The All India Gig Workers' Union (Affiliated to CITU) is a registered trade union for all food delivery, logistics, and service workers that work on any app-based platforms in India.

Contact: contactaigwu@gmail.com

Connect: twitter.com/aigwu_union; facebook.com/aigwu

Author: Nihira Ram, Bengaluru, All India Gig Workers' Union

Images: All India Gig Workers' Union (AIGWU)

Design: Annushka Jaliwala

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In September 2022, a small group from the All India Gig Workers Union (AIGWU), including myself, conducted an informal survey of more than 50 migrant workers living in a slum in India's start-up capital, Bengaluru. The 'housekeeping' workers were all service providers on the app, Urban Company (previously UrbanClap), primarily providing cleaning services and domestic labour. What we found was horrifying yet predictable. Despite being highly tied to their local context, the problems encountered by these Urban Company 'partners' were still tied to the trend of diluted worker rights at home and around the world.

Labour that is commonly subsumed under the label of 'gig work' has expanded astronomically across the globe. In India, approximately 7.7 million individuals are estimated to be currently engaged in platform and non-platform based gig work. NITI Aayog, the public policy think-tank housed under the country's Ministry of Planning, published a [report](#) in 2022 claiming that this estimate could touch almost 24 million by 2030. Much can be said of the report, which raises more questions than it seeks to answer. It does pay lip service to measures related to equity, inclusion, and social security, but its recommendations belie the deep struggles faced by workers engaged in platform work.

NITI Aayog hails the rise of platform work as revolutionary and inevitable. But are service platforms like food delivery apps and others either of those things?

LABOUR THAT HAS TO 'PAY TO WORK'

When workers join Urban Company as housekeeping services 'partners', they first pay INR 16,000 as 'joining fees'. After undergoing an uncompensated training programme, which costs them INR 1,000, workers are rebranded as 'professionals' who are now eligible to provide the services for which they have been trained.

However, the provision of services comes at a huge cost to the workers. They have to pay INR 6,000 per month in order to receive a number of guaranteed jobs as part of the Minimum Guarantee plan (MG Plan) – or, as the workers refer to them – leads. Urban Company terms this a 'subscription'.

In essence, Urban Company does not qualify people from whom they generate profit as workers. They consider them 'professionals' who are 'subscribing' to the platform in order to 'market' their 'services' to earn an income. Workers are cunningly portrayed as another set of 'customers' who buy guaranteed jobs from the platform on a monthly basis, essentially having to 'pay to work'.

INDEPENDENT FREELANCER OR OPPRESSED LABOUR?

Apart from this monthly subscription, workers are made to pay GST on each job. They are required to purchase company-branded uniforms and bags costing around INR 2,000. Further, they must also buy all cleaning supplies relevant to their work from Urban Company at higher costs than those sold elsewhere (INR 10,000 per month or above). This is despite the fact that workers find these supplies to be of poor quality and thus hazardous to their safety.

The framing of Urban Company 'partners' as non-workers is inaccurate for a number of reasons. A majority of the housekeeping workers with whom we spoke were not previously employed in the services sector. Urban Company targeted their slum as part of its recruitment drives in 2018. Knowing that their cleaning and housekeeping services vertical faced a deficit of labour supply despite a perceived spike in demand in Bengaluru, Urban Company aggressively onboarded men from this slum to undergo their training programme and join the company as cleaning and housekeeping 'professionals'. How, then, is Urban Company merely a platform from which pre-existing workers gain business, and not an employer hiring labour with particular skills for its supply chain?

The independent freelancer-like position that Urban Company claims for their housekeeping workers is also undercut by the fact that workers cannot take more than 40 hours of breaks between leads. If they do, their accounts are temporarily blocked, and they are barred from receiving work for a period of time.

If workers cancel a certain number of leads, their accounts may be blocked. This is not the case just for active cancellations. For example, If a worker is stuck in traffic and arrives at the location late, the lead stands cancelled and the worker's account may be blocked. Even if a customer does not answer a worker's confirmation call, the worker has to travel all the way to their house (regardless of whether the distance is 1 km or 10 km) and take a photo proving that the customer is a no-show, or else their account will be blocked! If a worker's aggregate performance rating dips below 4.7 (out of 5), their account stands blocked. Low ratings go unexplained, and cannot be challenged. Even customers who mistreat workers may be rating them poorly for absolutely no reason, and the only impact this would have is that the worker's account is temporarily blocked.

How independent is someone if they are not allowed to choose their own hours of work, where they work, and with whom they work?

Operational hurdles are not an oversight. Practices like these are deliberate results of a neoliberal and anti-worker political economy. The algorithm and app is designed in favour of the company, and at the expense of its workers.

Aside from material consequences, not being deemed a worker or employee creates other issues for Urban Company's workers. They receive no employment documents, and, consequently, no social security benefits. This also means that they are unable to leverage their time working at Urban Company and the skills they gained there into new opportunities. Even the training programme is outsourced to third party companies. With no offer letter, payslips, receipts, or other official employment documents, workers are trapped in an extractive and oppressive work arrangement and are unable to escalate their issues to labour offices if they want to hold the company accountable for unfair practices. There is, at no point in a worker's career with the company, proof on paper that they actually work at the company. How is that legal?

The workers have no health insurance. The insurance that the company offers only covers hospitalisation for accidents incurred while completing Urban Company work and excludes treatment or OPD charges for minor injuries. Workers say that although Urban Company claims to have affiliate hospitals that they can visit to claim accident insurance, this list remains out of reach. Workers are left unaware of the hospitals they can turn to for support in case they meet with accidents while at work.

Time and again, the company absolves itself of any responsibility when its clientele mistreats workers. Workers at Urban Company, particularly those in cleaning and domestic services, come from highly marginalised backgrounds. The people we spoke to were primarily Muslim migrants from oppressed caste groups. All of them shared that the company took no action when they escalated issues of customers verbally abusing and threatening them, or withholding payments from them. Problems of this nature are not created by Urban Company, but they show how the company has little to no care for workers and their legitimate grievances.

For example, one worker told us that a customer demanded he do something not on the original job (an issue that workers frequently raised). When the worker refused, the customer cancelled the job without informing the worker. The worker was swindled of a payment of INR 1,900 after finishing the work for which he had been hired. Did Urban Company protect its ‘partner’ in this case? No. The company’s helpline for workers provided no resolutions or actual support.

In another instance, when a worker showed up to do his job, a customer claimed that one person was not enough to complete the task. But this was not in the hands of the worker. Urban Company’s policy does not provide for additional labour or allow workers to pair up with others to do a job. But when the worker called the helpline, the staff exposed the company’s view and said, “Then you hire someone at your own expense. Do what the customer says.” A customer’s convenience comes from the worker’s wallet.

Helplines for workers frequently disregard the complex situations that they are supposed to solve. Unofficial management directives are such that the problems workers face are taken seriously only if they have ‘referred’ others to join Urban Company as ‘partners’.

The aggrieved workers with whom we spoke were said that they had to “get three or more people to join the company” if they wanted their grievances to be heard. Is this not extortion? Why would any worker want to tell another person to enter a toxic environment, especially one that abdicates itself of any responsibility towards its value creators?

MEAGRE EARNINGS, FEW PROSPECTS

The introduction of the monthly subscription policy, or Minimum Guarantee (MG) plan, by Urban Company in early 2022 faced stiff opposition from workers across the country. In Delhi, there were protests by women beauty workers, and later by AC services and grooming services workers. The workers were rightfully concerned about Urban Company’s ability to create an effective and just system. Since such drastic changes to operational policies are not provided in detail on print and the company is not open to feedback from workers, most strikes at the time demanded that the MG plan be revoked. In response, Urban Company quashed these protests, disabled accounts of key organisers, and in the case of women beauty workers in Delhi, even filed criminal injunctions against their own workers.



At the end of the day, even with the systemic inefficiencies, workers would be okay if they were earning a living wage that is commensurate with the effort they put in as Urban Company 'partners'. However, with the subscription fees, commissions, product costs, tax deductions, and unwarranted service fees that they pay to the company – not to mention the travel costs and mandatory discounts they are often forced to give to ensure 'customer stickiness' – most workers are left with scraps.



Images from protests against Urban Company's 'Pay to work' MG Plan by workers from different verticals in 2022

Ultimately, the 'pay to work' MG plan was steamrolled, and the workers' fears turned out to be true. In the case of housekeeping workers in Bengaluru, the INR 6,000 monthly subscription is meant to 'buy' workers 70 guaranteed leads per month. But this, like many of Urban Company's claims, is a lie. If a customer cancels a job and the worker receives no work (which happens very often), the lead is still considered part of the quota of 70 leads per month.

One worker we spoke to told us that they received 14 leads in a day. How is it physically possible (factoring in traffic, distance, and the fact that humans eat and sleep) to accept, let alone complete, 14 jobs? Some workers also told us that they sometimes get job notifications after midnight. These were also considered part of the 70-leads quota despite the fact that the jobs were labelled 'missed' by the time the workers woke up in the morning. Workers in other regions also described this as an issue they faced frequently. Is Urban Company saying that their 'professionals' have to be glued to their apps 24x7?

Here is a snapshot of one
Bengaluru housekeeping
worker's monthly earnings.

₹11,403	
Total Earnings	
18	
Jobs Delivered	
<hr/>	
Job Value	₹11,373 ➔
ADDITIONS	
Tip Amount	₹30 ➔
DEBITS	
UC Commission	- ₹1,130 ➔
UC Service Charge	- ₹112 ➔
Subscription	- ₹5,100 ➔
Tax	- ₹333 ➔
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NET EARNINGS	₹4,729

Factoring in ever-increasing living costs, INR 4,729 for a bachelor (whom this worker and most others we spoke to are not) is less than pittance. Alongside everything else we have detailed in this article, Urban Company seems less of an entrepreneurial venture and more of an exploitative sweatshop.

In 2023, a report by the Fairwork Foundation rated Urban Company **5 out of 10** for working conditions in India. The Foundation rates platform companies based on metrics or 'Fairwork principles' developed around pay, contracts, and working conditions, among others. But the Fairwork report does not reflect the actual conditions faced by Urban Company workers. According to the report, Urban Company ensures workers earn at least the local minimum wage after costs. Is this possible when Urban Company doesn't employ its

Many of Bengaluru's housekeeping workers with whom we spoke joined the company right after school. A paucity of jobs and their tenuous position as migrants meant that doing this work was a better gamble than sitting at home. They have been trapped by the company's unfair practices for years. They were hired by the company through recruitment drives and have not been given opportunities through which they can develop different skills or attempt to find better employment within the company or elsewhere.

workers in accordance with labour laws? A Bengaluru-based Urban Company cleaning worker's net earnings amounts to approximately INR 152 per day after costs. This falls drastically [below](#) the minimum wage rules in Karnataka for domestic workers (cleaners included).

For every Fairwork principle on which Urban Company received a positive score, the reality is the diametric opposite. On-ground management does not mitigate task-specific risks. As we have observed, harassment and hazard are both part of the Urban Company policy. The principle of "fair" contracts is laughably cruel considering that workers aren't allowed to read terms and conditions documents during onboarding or provided with any paperwork or records whatsoever. By steamrolling new operational policies that continuously impose unfair terms affecting pay and working conditions, Urban Company constantly revokes earlier verbal contracts without the consent of workers.

When we raise these issues on social media or with the company management, one of the most frequent responses is that these workers should just leave Urban Company. The dilapidated state of India's economy, which can absorb fewer and fewer workers and provide them with fair and dignified employment, is not a secret. However, one critical problem that Urban Company exacerbates is that of employability.

When we applaud upskilling programmes that tech companies like Amazon offer employees, are we comfortable with Urban Company taking no steps to improve their workers' skill-base? Do we consider those who work as gig workers not worthy of professional development? Until we incorporate these considerations, we cannot advance facile advice that these workers should simply 'choose' to leave their bread and butter.

To combat the policies Urban Company has followed so far, AIGWU has prepared a draft demand charter in consultation with housekeeping workers we interviewed in September 2022 and workers from other categories in a variety of roles (massage therapists, beauticians, AC services workers, and plumbers, to name a few).

We believe that Urban Company can and should thoroughly re-evaluate and improve their working environments. Through this charter, we hope to channel worker voices and urge Urban Company to drastically change its anti-worker policies.

ON EMPLOYMENT:

1. Redesignate those providing services on Urban Company or working within Urban Company as employees/ contract workers and provide legal and valid employment documents (ID cards, employment letters, and health insurance cards with Urban Company's name).
2. Extend all legally mandated employment benefits, including parental leaves and others, to workers whom Urban Company currently refers to as 'independent contractors', 'partners', or 'professionals'.
3. Cease the punitive process of blocking of workers' accounts based on cancellation moratoriums, inactivity for a certain period, or any other reason considered grounds for blocking an employee from receiving work. Design performance criteria and policies for quality checks with the workers' inputs.

ON WAGES:

4. Fix a context-specific minimum wage that will be guaranteed to those providing services on Urban Company.
 - If a worker offers cleaning services in Bengaluru (for example), provide a set minimum income each month that considers the city's cost of living and all other variables.
 - Make the minimum wage exclusive of travel costs and other business expenses (such as product costs and phone data, among others), which Urban Company must cover.
5. Do not ask workers to pay deposits, joining, or training fees to Urban Company.

6. Eliminate the TDS deductions and Urban Company's subscription and commission costs (currently ranging upwards of INR 5,000 per month) levied on workers.
 7. Collect GST on Urban Company's revenue and not on workers' incomes.
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ON HEALTH AND SAFETY:

8. Provide all employees (even those currently referred to as 'independent contractors', 'partners', or 'professionals') within Urban Company holistic health coverage that exceeds road accident insurance.
 - Process compensation for road accidents as soon as possible and with full transparency and proper documentation.
 - Provide an updated list of medical institutions in every region across the country where Urban Company is active and that come under Urban Company's current road accident coverage and future health insurance policies.
9. Guarantee the safety of women employees by constituting appropriately representative ICC and POSH committees to address workplace harassment.
10. Establish creches and implement the well-being measures required by law for women workers, such as the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961, Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and other relevant and necessary laws.
11. Guarantee the safety of all workers by instituting Welfare Officers and ensuring that helplines and networks of support are easily accessible, accountable, and actionable.
12. Introduce mechanisms for all workers through which they can safely exit the company or dangerous work environment – such as a service consumer's house or other location – without repercussions like penalty charges or blocking of their accounts.
13. Take serious action on negative reviews/ complaints that workers leave on customers who engage in unfair practices like the refusal to pay, abuse of employees, sexual harassment of women workers, and other such egregious acts.

ON THE PLATFORM:

14. Leads scheduled for odd hours of the night. should not be automatically accepted by Urban Company's platform or assigned to workers.
15. Multiple leads for the same or impossible time slots (given the distance between locations and commuting durations). should not be assigned to the same worker.
 - The onus of cancelling overlapping or simultaneous appointments should lie on the platform's algorithm and not on the worker.

ON MANAGEMENT:

16. Reincorporate weekly meetings between workers and supervisors; ensure that supervisors are committed and equipped to meeting workers' needs and prioritising their well-being and growth.
17. Conduct thorough quality checks of the tools, products, and equipment given to workers.
 - Give workers the freedom to purchase necessary and relevant items outside of Urban Company if they wish and as per their need.
18. Only count fulfilled and paid jobs in the monthly quota of leads that Urban Company provides workers.
19. Stop the insistence of the referral programme wherein a worker brings a certain number of people to join Urban Company as what they currently refer to as 'independent contractors', 'partners', or 'professionals'.
 - Provide grievance redressals and other support to a worker regardless of whether they refer people to Urban Company for employment.



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