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Platform Labour Protest in India

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Platform Labour Protest: India, 2015 - 2023

As India's digital infrastructure blossomed in the 2010s through such state-led initiatives as Digital India and India Stack, so too did its platform economy. By 2020, the country was estimated to have a platform workforce of 7.7 million, with many undertaking geographically tethered work for a range of home-grown firms such as Ola, Swiggy, Zomato and Blinkit, alongside multinational platform giants such as Uber. The emergent years of protest amongst this workforce were marked by notably contentious and militant forms of collective action, accompanied by a wide diversity of organisational initiatives.

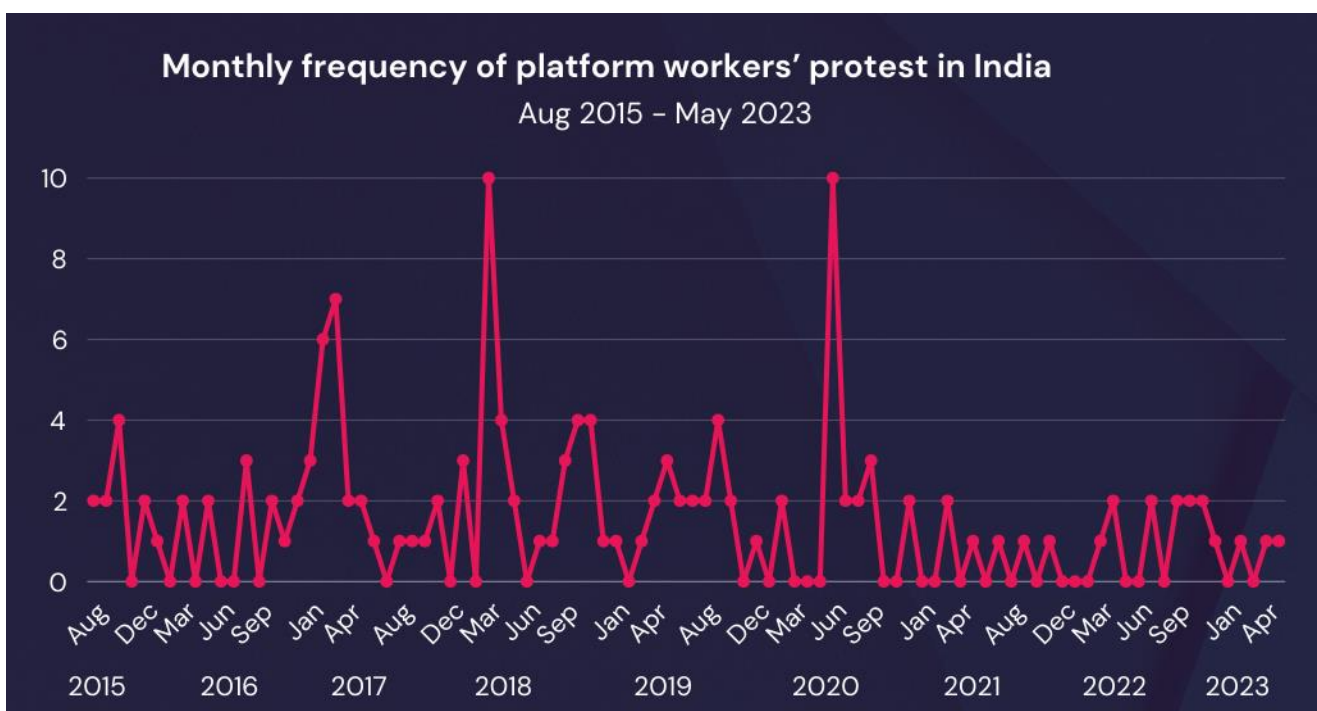
144

Protests recorded between 2015 and 2023

Strikes and demonstrations, in combination, amounted to 97% of the 144 instances of protest in India identified by the Leeds Index from August 2015 to May 2023, with only 2% of protests deploying legal action and 1% undertaking efforts at institutionalisation – where workers sought to build new representative bodies.

70% of those protests lasted for 24 hours or less, and 62% saw informal groups of workers – with no discernible affiliation to any collective organisation or union – involved. On the surface this indicates an absence of long-running, concerted action over sustained periods of time. However, this is not to say that there were no efforts at deep organising or coordination developing during this period. Organisations emerged which recruited significant numbers of platform workers, developed their collective capacity to pursue their interests, and mobilised them to action. Such organisations were initially focused in specific localities, but a nationwide movement has gradually cohered over time.

In the Delhi National Capital Region, the Sarvodaya Drivers Association (SDA) – which organises ride-hailing workers – initiated the first wave of simultaneous, multi-location platform worker protest in the country, spanning February and March of 2017. This responded to the withdrawal of incentives which Uber and Ola had initially offered drivers as a means enticing them into the platform workforce.



The SDA led two weeks of sustained strike action in Delhi, which was disruptive enough to force Delhi's High Court to issue an interim order forbidding workers from blockading the vehicles of strikebreaking drivers and from demonstrating outside Uber's local office. In the same month, ride-hailing workers in Hyderabad demonstrated following the suicide of a colleague, and workers in Bengaluru took strike action calling for the suspension of the platforms' pooling services, which allowed customers to share journeys and save money, but which drivers saw as contributing to their declining pay. In Mumbai, the drop in pay coincided with a proposed cap on surge pricing by the Maharashtra City Taxi Rules 2017, viewed by striking workers as a proposed cap on their income. And in Chennai, workers took strike action with the support of the Chennai Motor Vehicle Workers' Association, an affiliate of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), in the first clear instance of a mainstream Indian trade union intervening in the platform economy in our dataset. This wave of simultaneous protest can be considered "organic" - where multi-location action emerges without any explicit coordination, responding to issues shared throughout the workforce.

A year later, in March 2018, a second wave emerged - again amongst Uber and Ola drivers, and again responding to low pay compared to what the companies had promised. As in other countries, concerns regarding pay are the most frequent motivator for platform workers' protest in India. This wave of action saw a greater effort at deliberate coordination than in the previous case. The call to strike initially came from Maharashtra Navnirman Vahatuk Sena (MNVS), the transportation workers' wing of the regionalist, Hindutva political party Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). Alongside four days of strike action in Mumbai, MNVS was able to ignite strike action and demonstrations in Pune and Nagpur - Maharashtra's three largest cities.

Type of action	Relative frequency
Strikes (and log-offs)	49%
Demonstrations	48%
Legal action	2%
Institutionalisation	1%

MNVS also called on drivers to take action throughout India, and there is evidence that this call was taken up to varying extents in Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Guwahati, but the regional focus of MNVS meant that protest remained largely concentrated in Maharashtra. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of drivers reportedly took part in this wave of action, forcing a meeting with the management of both companies and a commitment to concessions.

The size of platform workers' protests in India is noteworthy, with 31 instances involving over one thousand workers - often multiple thousands. Of those, 23 involved exclusively ride-hailing workers, with the remaining eight led by food delivery workers. The ride-hailing workforce dominates our dataset in India, undertaking 67% of platform workers' protest between 2015 and 2023. Food delivery workers' protest begins to increase from 2019 onwards and overall makes up 26% of protest, with the remaining 5% consisting of protest by mixed combinations of platform workers and with 2% led by grocery delivery workers at Dunzo and Blinkit.

Mainstream trade unions, union federations and political parties increasingly lent support to striking food delivery workers from 2019 onwards. In Hyderabad, Swiggy riders protesting low pay were supported by the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in May 2019; in Nagpur, striking Zomato riders were supported by Shiv Sena, a Hindutva political party, in June 2019; and in Vijayawada striking Swiggy riders were led by CITU in August 2019. This foreshadowed such bodies setting up their own nationwide organisations aimed at recruiting platform workers, such as AITUC's United Food Delivery Partners' Union and CITU's All India Gig Workers Union.

A further significant development occurred at the end of 2019, with the founding of the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT). This saw a range of local ride-hailing workers' organisations from nine major cities band together, facilitated by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), without any affiliation to India's domestic trade union federations or political parties.

Actor	Relative frequency
Mainstream trade unions	10%
Grassroots trade unions	31%
Workers' collectives	24%
Informal groups of workers	62%
Other	6%

The numbers do not add up to 100% because multiple actors were involved per protest event.

At the end of March 2020, India entered what is considered amongst the strictest COVID-19 lockdowns in the world. While the ride-hailing industry drew to a standstill, food delivery workers were deemed essential. Platform companies such as Swiggy and Zomato expanded to include grocery delivery and rolled out invasive measures intended to monitor the hygiene of their workers and assuage customer anxieties. Following an initial slump in orders, the industry ultimately boomed. The workforce ballooned as unemployment grew and few alternative earning opportunities remained. In sharp contrast to the overall picture in India, the frequency of food delivery workers' protests overtakes that of ride-hailing workers' protests in 2020.

The newly-founded IFAT was quick to include food delivery workers alongside its ride-hailing membership in the early months of the lockdown. With support from the ITF, IFAT carried out a series of surveys amongst thousands of workers in both food delivery and ride-hailing and launched a campaign for better health and safety standards, company health insurance, and for higher wages to offset additional costs. Health and safety emerges as the second most frequent motivation for protest in India, relating to workers' concerns during the pandemic but also to incidents of assault, robbery and road traffic accidents experienced by app-based drivers and riders, who then express frustration at the lack of support they feel is offered by platform companies.

As a result of IFAT's early organising efforts, the third wave of coordinated action in India saw ride-hailing and food delivery drivers protest together for the first time in our Indian dataset, with simultaneous demonstrations led by IFAT in at least five cities on the 8th of June 2020.

Subsequent years saw lower levels of protest, but with new coordinating infrastructures now in place and new battlegrounds opening up. In September 2021 we saw one of the few instances of legal action undertaken by workers during the emergent years of platform workers' protest, with IFAT filing a public interest litigation at the Supreme Court calling for platform workers to be classified as "unorganised workers" or "wage workers" according to the Unorganised Workers Social Welfare Security Act, 2008. Notably, this protest is among the tiny number where platform workers have emphasised employment status in India.

There have also been new regulatory initiatives explicitly addressing platform work as India's state seeks to get to grips with this volatile economy and its defiant workforce. The Code on Social Security, 2020, introduced draft rules regarding welfare provisions for platform workers. These rules, however, require local implementation by India's states and union territories, which have been conspicuously slow to date. Future research by the Leeds Index will indicate any effects that this shifting regulatory context has had on workers' discontent and propensity to protest.

