

Platform Labour and the Reconstruction of Employment Law in Indonesia's Digital Work Relations

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Abstract

Platform labour has altered the legal organization of work in Indonesia by expanding digitally mediated labour arrangements across everyday service sectors. Despite this transformation, legal debate has remained strongly oriented toward worker classification, leaving broader questions about algorithmic governance, fragmented workplace authority, and technologically mediated labour vulnerability insufficiently developed. This article aims to examine how platform labour reconstructs legal work relations in Indonesia beyond the employee-independent contractor binary. The study applies a qualitative doctrinal and conceptual research design grounded in the analytical dimensions of economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control. Data were drawn from Indonesian legal materials, regulatory texts, and relevant academic discussions on employment law and platform labour. The analysis was conducted through interpretive examination of the gap between formal contractual status and the actual organization of work under platform systems. A structured analytical framework was used to assess how dependency, authority, and control operate in digitally mediated labour relations. The discussion indicates that platform labour in Indonesia cannot be understood adequately through contractual classification alone because legal vulnerability is increasingly produced through data-driven governance and indirect forms of labour discipline. Employment law therefore requires a broader normative orientation that recognizes dependency, subordination, and control in technologically mediated work settings. The article contributes to the field by offering a coherent legal framework for analyzing platform labour as a transformation of work relations rather than merely a dispute over worker status.

Keyword

platform labour; employment law; digital work; labour relations

1. Introduction

Platform labour has become one of the most visible expressions of digital economic change in Indonesia. Through ride-hailing, delivery, freelance, and other app-based services, work is increasingly organized through platforms rather than conventional firms (Van Doorn, 2017). This transformation matters because it changes not only how labour is accessed but also how labour is governed. Digital systems now shape entry, performance, discipline, and income distribution in ways that were previously associated with direct managerial supervision. In this setting, work relations are no longer defined only by physical workplaces or stable organizational hierarchies (Silaban et al., 2023). Instead, they are mediated through applications, data infrastructures, and algorithmic coordination. As a result, the legal meaning of work in Indonesia is being tested by forms of labour organization that appear flexible on the surface but remain structured by platform power.

This development raises an important legal and social problem because Indonesian labour protection still depends heavily on established categories of employment. In



public debate and legal discussion, the main issue is often whether platform workers should be treated as employees or as independent contractors. Although this issue is important, it does not fully capture the practical reality of platform-mediated work. Many workers operate under conditions in which they seem formally independent but are materially dependent on platform access for income (Wang & Tomassetti, 2024). Their daily activities are also influenced by ratings, incentives, sanctions, and automated systems that direct conduct without conventional face-to-face commands. This makes platform labour a real-world legal concern rather than a merely conceptual debate. It affects income security, bargaining position, vulnerability to exclusion, and the scope of labour protection available to workers. For that reason, the question is not only how to classify platform workers, but also how to understand the changing architecture of work relations itself (Zahra & Grasiawaty, 2025).

Existing discussion already provides an important starting point for understanding this transformation. It is known that platform labour challenges traditional legal distinctions because the formal contract often does not reflect the actual organization of work. It is also known that platforms distribute managerial functions through technological systems rather than through visible supervisors. In this structure, control may operate through performance metrics, customer evaluations, incentive design, and the constant possibility of deactivation (Alfarizi et al., 2025). It is further understood that many platform workers occupy a condition of economic dependence even when they are described as self-employed. These observations suggest that the legal form of independence may coexist with practical subordination in everyday labour relations. Therefore, the current debate has already moved beyond the assumption that contractual language alone can explain digital work. What is increasingly recognized is that platform labour exposes tensions between legal form and social reality (Ferrari & Graham, 2021).

However, what remains less developed is a broader legal interpretation of how platform labour reconstructs work relations in doctrinal terms. Much of the discussion still circles around classification disputes, which means the analysis often stops at deciding whether existing categories can include platform workers. This leaves a deeper question insufficiently explored, namely how digital labour transforms the foundations upon which employment law identifies power, dependency, and vulnerability. When control is exercised through algorithms, fragmented task structures, and data-driven systems, traditional indicators of authority become less visible (Janssen et al., 2025). As a result, legal analysis may fail to capture how subordination operates in technologically mediated conditions. What remains unknown is not simply the correct label for platform workers, but the extent to which employment law must adapt its conceptual focus. The uncertainty lies in how law should recognize labour relations that are formally flexible yet substantively controlled. This unresolved issue is especially important in Indonesia, where digital platforms continue to expand while legal categories remain relatively rigid.

The main research gap therefore lies in the limited connection between the reality of platform labour and a legal framework capable of interpreting that reality beyond binary classification. Existing discussion identifies dependency and control, but it often does not synthesize them into a broader reconstruction of employment law. This article addresses that gap by applying a theoretical focus on economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control. Economic dependency explains why workers who appear autonomous may still be structurally reliant on the platform for access to income. Functional subordination clarifies that authority can exist even when it is indirect, dispersed, or embedded in digital procedures rather than personal supervision (Supriadi et al., 2025). Digital control shows how managerial power is exercised through ratings, algorithms, data monitoring, and platform rules that shape worker behaviour. Taken together, these concepts provide a more coherent lens for understanding platform labour

as a transformation of legal work relations. The gap is therefore not only empirical or doctrinal, but also conceptual, because the law still lacks an adequately integrated framework for reading digitally mediated labour relations (Gramano, 2020).

Filling this gap is justified because the applied theory directly addresses the mismatch between formal legal status and actual labour conditions. A narrow contractual approach assumes that legal protection can be determined by visible hierarchy or explicit supervision. Yet platform labour demonstrates that power can be exercised through systems that organize conduct without traditional commands. In that situation, economic dependency becomes crucial because it reveals the worker's material vulnerability within an apparently flexible arrangement. Functional subordination is equally important because it shows that direction and discipline may still exist even when the worker is not formally placed inside a conventional organizational chain (Wood et al., 2019). Digital control completes this framework by explaining how technology becomes the medium through which labour is managed, evaluated, and restricted. The theory is therefore coherent with the gap because it shifts attention from what the contract says to how labour is actually governed. This theoretical move is necessary if employment law is to remain responsive to contemporary forms of work organization.

On that basis, the article is guided by a set of interrelated research questions. First, it asks how platform labour challenges the traditional legal understanding of work relations in Indonesia. This question is important because it moves beyond narrow classification and examines the doctrinal foundations of employment law itself. Second, it asks how economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control shape platform labour relations in the Indonesian setting. This question links the practical features of digital work to a more refined legal interpretation of labour vulnerability and authority. Third, it asks how employment law should respond when work is governed through technological systems rather than standard contractual hierarchy. These questions are designed to clarify both the conceptual problem and its normative implications. They also ensure that the discussion remains focused on legal transformation rather than descriptive accounts of platform growth alone. In this way, the research questions create a coherent bridge between background, problem definition, and theoretical framing.

The urgency of this study lies in the speed with which digital labour expands while legal interpretation struggles to keep pace. Platform work is already embedded in everyday economic life, yet the legal language used to understand it often remains tied to older assumptions about workplace structure and managerial authority. This creates a risk that workers facing real dependence and control may remain only partially visible within legal protection frameworks. In Indonesia, this issue is especially urgent because platform labour is not marginal, but part of a wider transformation in how services, livelihoods, and labour markets operate. If legal analysis remains fixed on formal status alone, it may overlook the deeper vulnerabilities produced by algorithmic organization and fragmented work relations. The study is therefore important not only for academic debate but also for the broader future of labour regulation in digital economies. Its contribution lies in reframing platform labour as a challenge to the legal architecture of work rather than a simple problem of classification. By doing so, it opens a more coherent basis for understanding how employment law should think about dependency, subordination, and control under digital conditions.

This article also contributes to the broader intellectual discussion by clarifying why platform labour should be treated as a structural legal issue rather than an exceptional category dispute. The value of this approach is that it helps readers see continuity between old concerns of employment law and new forms of labour governance. Employment law has always been concerned with unequal power, worker vulnerability, and the conditions under which labour is controlled. What changes in the digital economy

is not the disappearance of these concerns, but the form in which they appear. Platform systems conceal authority behind interfaces, metrics, and automated decisions, making domination less visible but not less significant. A theory centred on economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control allows these continuities and changes to be understood together. This strengthens the conceptual clarity of the discussion and makes the article relevant beyond a single dispute over legal labels. The paragraph flow of the article therefore builds toward a clear argument that Indonesia needs a more adaptive legal understanding of platform-mediated work relations.

2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a doctrinal-conceptual orientation to examine how platform labour transforms legal work relations in Indonesia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research does not seek to measure the frequency of platform work or test statistical relationships, but rather to analyze meanings, legal concepts, and forms of labour control embedded in digitally mediated work arrangements. The design is centered on interpretive legal analysis, which allows the study to explore how employment law categories operate when work is organized through platforms, algorithms, and fragmented managerial structures (Morgan, 2022). The analytical framework is based on three interrelated dimensions derived from the study's theoretical focus, namely economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control. These dimensions are used to assess whether formal contractual labels adequately reflect the actual structure of labour relations. This design works well for the research because the central problem is conceptual and normative: the study aims to understand how law should read new forms of work organization that are not fully captured by conventional legal categories. By using qualitative analysis, the research can closely examine the gap between formal legal classification and the practical conditions of labour vulnerability and control in platform-mediated work (Elo et al., 2014).

The data sources consist of primary and secondary legal materials, including Indonesian labour law provisions, regulations relevant to employment relations, policy-related legal texts, and academic literature on platform labour, employment law, and digital work relations. Data collection was conducted through document-based research, involving systematic identification, selection, and review of legal texts and scholarly sources relevant to the legal characterization of platform work in Indonesia. The units of analysis are legal concepts, doctrinal categories, and forms of labour relation represented in platform-mediated work, rather than individual respondents. The main research instrument is a structured analytical matrix used to code and organize materials according to the three analytical dimensions of economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control, alongside related legal indicators such as contractual status, authority, and vulnerability. Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation across legal texts and academic discussions, conceptual consistency in the application of the analytical framework, and transparent alignment between research questions, theoretical categories, and documentary evidence. Reliability was supported by using clear inclusion criteria for materials and a consistent coding logic across all sources. Because the study is document-based and does not involve direct human participation, informed consent was not required from respondents; however, ethical standards were maintained through accurate representation of sources, proper attribution of ideas, and careful handling of any referenced material to preserve confidentiality where applicable (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

3. Result and Discussion

Platform labour in Indonesia has intensified the inadequacy of legal categories built around a stable distinction between employment and independent contracting. The conventional doctrinal structure presumes that worker status can be inferred from formal agreements, identifiable managerial hierarchy, and relatively fixed organizational boundaries. Platform-mediated work disrupts these assumptions because labour is coordinated through digital interfaces that allocate tasks, evaluate performance, and impose behavioural discipline without the visible architecture of the traditional workplace. The legal question therefore extends beyond the classification of workers into pre-existing categories. What is at stake is the capacity of employment law to recognize a reconfigured relation of power in which contractual flexibility coexists with structured dependency and technologically mediated control. This pressure is particularly significant in Indonesia, where platform work occupies an expanding place in urban service economies while labour protection remains anchored to older models of organizational supervision (Frey, 2020).

The central doctrinal limitation lies in the continued dependence on binary classification as the dominant legal lens for evaluating platform labour. That lens treats the issue as a matter of determining whether workers fall on one side or the other of the employee-independent contractor divide. Such an approach narrows legal analysis to threshold status questions and leaves insufficient room for examining the operational structure of labour relations after access to work has been digitized. In platform settings, the formal contract often signals autonomy, yet the practical organization of work embeds obligations, incentives, and sanctions that closely shape worker behaviour. The resulting mismatch between legal form and labour reality weakens the explanatory force of conventional doctrine. Indonesian debates that remain confined to status determination risk overlooking how platform organization modifies the very grounds on which legal dependence and employer authority have historically been recognized (Van Minh, 2025).

A more persuasive reading emerges when attention shifts from formal labels to the material conditions under which work is performed. Economic dependency provides an essential entry point because it captures the worker's reliance on platform access as a continuing source of livelihood rather than a merely occasional market opportunity. In many platform arrangements, the apparent freedom to log in and out does not remove the worker's structural need to remain visible, available, and compliant within the platform ecosystem. Income generation depends on continued access to tasks, favourable ratings, and algorithmically structured incentives. Under these conditions, autonomy appears less as a substantive redistribution of power than as a contractual description overlaying a highly conditioned earning environment. Employment law becomes difficult to apply not because dependency has disappeared, but because dependency is now produced through mechanisms that are less legible within inherited doctrinal categories (Hukum et al., 2025).

Functional subordination deepens this account by clarifying how authority operates in the absence of conventional supervisory chains. Platform workers do not typically receive direct orders in the traditional workplace sense, yet their conduct is continuously shaped by operational rules embedded in the digital infrastructure. Performance metrics, acceptance expectations, service standards, customer ratings, and automated penalties create a behavioural framework that channels decisions and limits effective discretion. Subordination in this context is neither symbolic nor incidental (Isbah, 2022). It is exercised through an architecture that organizes compliance indirectly while preserving the appearance of independent work. Indonesian labour law, when oriented primarily toward visible supervision and formal command, struggles to capture such dispersed forms of direction. The issue is therefore not whether control exists, but whether doctrine

has the conceptual tools to identify control when it is translated into platform procedures and data-driven governance (Zlatanović & Ostojić, 2021).

Digital control gives this transformation its most distinctive legal character because managerial power is embedded in technical systems rather than solely in human actors. Algorithms structure task distribution, information asymmetry limits worker visibility into decision-making, and deactivation functions as a powerful disciplinary mechanism. These features reorganize authority in ways that reduce transparency while intensifying organizational reach. Control is exercised not only through explicit prohibitions but also through calibrated incentives, ranking systems, and constant evaluation. Such mechanisms alter the relation between law and labour by displacing the signs of authority on which traditional employment analysis has often relied (Nur et al., 2023). Previous discussion on platform work has acknowledged that classification is contested, yet a narrower focus on status disputes has often obscured the normative importance of algorithmic governance itself. The Indonesian context makes this especially salient because rapid digitalization has outpaced a legal vocabulary capable of addressing technologically mediated labour vulnerability. Table 1 summarizes the main analytical dimensions emerging from this discussion and clarifies their relevance for the reconstruction of legal work relations in Indonesia.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions of platform labour

<i>Analytical dimension</i>	<i>Operational characteristic in platform labour</i>	<i>Doctrinal implication for employment law</i>
<i>Worker classification</i>	Formal contracts emphasize flexibility and independent status	Status labels alone cannot capture the practical structure of labour relations
<i>Economic dependency</i>	Continued income relies on platform access, visibility, and task allocation	Dependency should be treated as a substantive basis for legal protection
<i>Functional subordination</i>	Worker behaviour is shaped by ratings, incentives, service rules, and performance metrics	Subordination can exist without direct face-to-face supervision
<i>Digital control</i>	Algorithms, data monitoring, and deactivation mechanisms organize and discipline labour	Control must be recognized in technologically mediated and fragmented forms

The table reinforces the article’s argument by showing that the legal problem is distributed across interrelated dimensions rather than confined to a single status dispute. Worker classification remains relevant, but its analytical value is limited when considered in isolation from dependency, subordination, and digital control. Economic dependency reveals why the market language of flexibility can conceal a high degree of structural vulnerability. Functional subordination demonstrates that direction may be operational rather than visibly hierarchical (Qadri, 2020). Digital control explains how power persists through data systems that are harder to scrutinize than traditional managerial practices. The table therefore provides a synthetic framework for understanding why platform labour cannot be adequately assessed through the binary architecture of conventional employment law. It supports a broader legal interpretation in which the focus shifts from nominal independence to the actual modalities through which labour is organized and constrained. This framework also sharpens the relation between platform labour and earlier legal debates on precarious work. Prior scholarship has long recognized that employment law exists to address unequal bargaining power and the risks created when

workers depend on others for access to income (Christiyono et al., 2024). Platform-mediated work does not displace these concerns; it recasts them through technological forms. The worker is no longer subordinated only through direct command or fixed workplace routines, but through interfaces that silently distribute opportunity and sanction. The novelty lies less in the existence of vulnerability than in the institutional form through which vulnerability is generated and normalized. In Indonesia, this shift is significant because the spread of platform work can create a false impression that labour has moved outside the domain of employment law altogether. A more careful reading indicates that legal relevance persists precisely because power has been reorganized rather than eliminated (Teng, 2025).

The normative implications are substantial because a contract-centred approach risks excluding workers whose dependence is evident in practice but obscured in form. If protection continues to hinge exclusively on the presence of traditional employment indicators, platform operators may exercise extensive control while remaining legally insulated from corresponding obligations. This imbalance weakens the protective rationale of employment law and allows doctrinal formalism to override the social function of labour regulation (Noorikhshan et al., 2025). A framework grounded in economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control offers a more coherent route for addressing this imbalance. It does not require the abandonment of legal distinctions, but it does require a recalibration of what counts as legally relevant evidence of organized labour power. For Indonesian legal discourse, such recalibration is necessary to prevent digital labour relations from escaping scrutiny merely because their structure differs from the industrial template on which many rules were historically built.

The discussion also highlights an important strength of the proposed framework: it makes visible forms of authority that are otherwise misread as neutral technical coordination. Platform systems are often presented as efficient intermediaries matching supply and demand in real time. That description, while partially accurate, is insufficient because it overlooks how the same systems determine access, measure compliance, and redistribute risk downward to workers (Hakim, 2025). By treating algorithms and data infrastructures as legally meaningful sites of governance, the framework avoids reducing platform labour to a commercial transaction between formally autonomous actors. This analytical strength is relevant for Indonesia, where the legal consequences of digital mediation are often discussed through business innovation rather than labour regulation. A sharper conceptualization of platform power allows legal analysis to respond to innovation without naturalizing the inequalities embedded within it. At the same time, the discussion remains subject to certain limitations that should be acknowledged at the level of legal analysis. A doctrinal and conceptual reading cannot by itself capture the full diversity of worker experience across all platform sectors, nor can it exhaust the institutional variations among ride-hailing, delivery, and other forms of app-based work. The intensity of dependency and control may differ across sectors and local labour markets. Yet this limitation does not diminish the value of the argument advanced here, because the purpose is not to produce sectoral measurement but to clarify the legal dimensions that conventional doctrine tends to miss (Rahmah et al., 2025). The conceptual emphasis is justified by the nature of the problem: employment law must first be able to recognize digitally mediated subordination before it can regulate it adequately. The most pressing limitation in current debate lies not in excessive abstraction, but in the persistence of legal categories that are too narrow to register the changing structure of work relations.

An unexpected but analytically important feature of platform labour is the coexistence of flexibility and constraint within the same institutional arrangement. The rhetoric of flexibility suggests expanded worker autonomy, yet the operational reality

often requires constant responsiveness to platform signals, strategic adaptation to incentive structures, and compliance with standards that remain externally defined. The worker may choose when to connect, but meaningful earning opportunities are conditioned by rules over which the worker has little influence (Rahman et al., 2024). This coexistence complicates simplistic oppositions between freedom and control. It indicates that digital labour relations should be understood through gradients of dependence and governance rather than through absolute assumptions of either autonomy or subordination. For Indonesian employment law, the implication is that legal analysis must become more attentive to hybrid forms of labour organization in which managerial authority is diffused, datafied, and embedded within the infrastructure of access itself. These developments open a wider agenda for legal scholarship and policy reflection in Indonesia. Further inquiry is needed into how different platform sectors distribute control, how regulatory institutions might operationalize dependency and digital governance in legal reasoning, and how labour protection can be adapted without relying solely on inherited industrial categories. Practical relevance follows directly from this agenda because legal uncertainty over platform labour affects not only doctrinal coherence but also the everyday security of workers whose economic position depends on continued participation in digitally governed markets. A results and discussion section framed in this way underscores that the legal reconstruction of work is already underway through the spread of platform organization. The task for employment law is to recognize that reconstruction at the level of doctrine, rather than allowing formal contractual language to define the boundaries of protection in a domain increasingly shaped by algorithmic power.

4. Conclusion

Platform labour in Indonesia has emerged as a significant challenge to the traditional architecture of employment law because the legal organization of work can no longer be understood adequately through the employee-independent contractor binary alone. The discussion has emphasized that the central issue lies in the transformation of labour relations under conditions of economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control. Formal contractual flexibility does not eliminate vulnerability when workers remain materially reliant on platform access, behaviourally shaped by performance systems, and continuously governed through algorithmic mechanisms. In this setting, the doctrinal foundations of employment law are placed under pressure because legal categories built around visible supervision and stable organizational hierarchy are less capable of capturing technologically mediated authority. The broader implication is that platform labour should be understood not as an exceptional deviation from established legal principles, but as a structural development that requires a more adaptive reading of work relations in the digital economy.

The contribution to the field lies in reframing platform labour from a narrow classification dispute into a wider question about the legal reconstruction of work relations in Indonesia. By integrating the analytical dimensions of economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control, the discussion offers a more coherent framework for interpreting labour vulnerability beyond formal status labels. This perspective contributes to employment law scholarship by clarifying that managerial power has not disappeared in platform work, but has been reorganized through data systems, incentive structures, and fragmented forms of coordination. It also contributes to legal debate in Indonesia by providing a conceptual basis for understanding why platform-mediated work remains within the normative concern of labour law even when it appears contractually independent. Such an approach strengthens the capacity of legal

analysis to address contemporary forms of work organization without reducing digital labour to a purely commercial or technological phenomenon.

Future research should develop this framework by examining how economic dependency, functional subordination, and digital control operate across different platform sectors and regulatory settings in Indonesia. Comparative work would be especially valuable for identifying sectoral variation in the intensity of control and the degree of worker dependence, as well as for assessing how different legal interpretations respond to those variations. Further scholarship may also explore how courts, policymakers, and regulatory institutions can translate these analytical dimensions into practical legal standards that remain sensitive to digitally mediated forms of labour governance. Greater attention is also needed to the interaction between platform design, labour vulnerability, and access to social protection, particularly in rapidly expanding urban digital economies. Advancing these lines of inquiry would deepen the conceptual development of employment law and support more responsive legal approaches to work relations shaped by technological systems.

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