Weaving A Movement: The Making of the Africa Tech Workers Movement

Project~ETHER

siasa PLACE
We the people_inventing the future

Dedication

Dedicated to the Africa Tech Workers Movement,
may all your struggles bear fruit.



Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge and honour my good ancestors for their guidance in this journey that I have walked through my Mozilla Fellowship.

I would also like to give a special mention to Roselyn Odoyo, who was my first supervisor from Mozilla when I began this fellowship. Her insights were valuable at the very beginning. I would also like to especially thank Amy Raikar who took on from Roselyn, guiding through every step of the way. A special thanks to other fellows, in their different journeys as they wrote different projects but built a community.

Thank you Mozilla Foundation for your support of fellows and fellowship projects that are crucial to building a just internet! Many thanks to Siasa Place for hosting me as a fellow and building the future boldly.

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Angela Chukunzira

Wimbo wa Mapambano

Kupigwa na kupokonywa maisha
Haituzuia sisi wananchi
Kupigania Uhuru wetu
Na haki ya jasho letu
(Jasho Letu)
Na haki ya jasho letu
Tumekataa kupiga magoti
Mbele ya hawa wauaji
Bila shaka sisi pia ni watu
Hali ya utumwa tumeikataa
(Kata Kata)
Hali ya utumwa tumeikataa
Tutanyakuwa mashamba yetu
Tupiganie Uhuru wetu
Tuikomboe elimu yetu
Utamaduni na viwanda vyetu
(Tukomboe)
Utamaduni na viwanda vyetu
Sisi hatutaki kudhulumiwa
Hatutaki tena mauaji
Hili kupe tuliangushe
Haki na Uhuru tuchanue
(Tuchanue)
Haki na Uhuru tuchanue

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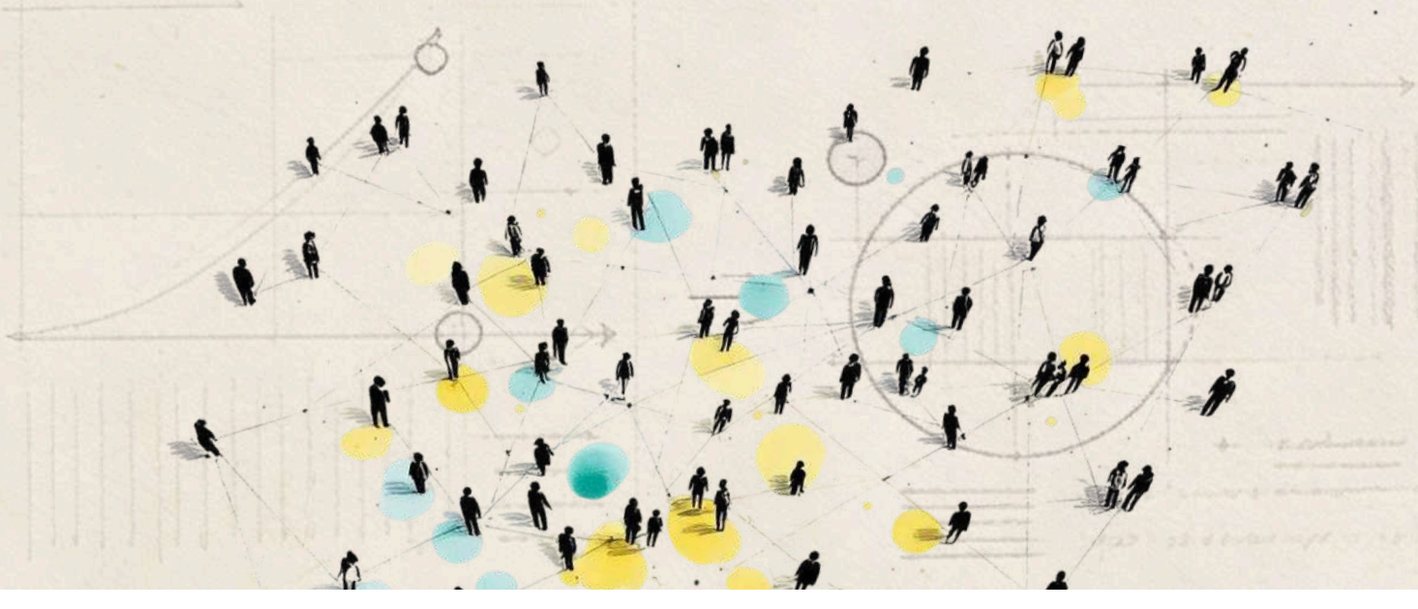
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PART ONE: #REJECT

The writing of this report is premised in a In a socio-political context.

where young people find themselves in a situation where some of the aspirations that were sold to them are not materialialising.

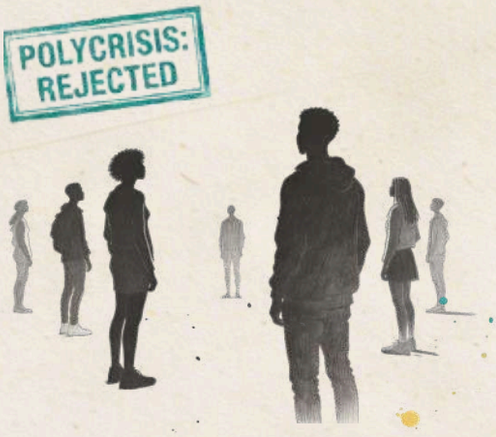
On one hand, they are distraught by their living conditions and the hopelessness surrounding them.
On the other hand, they are rejecting the status quo. Recognising that they deserve dignified jobs, and a right to live a decent life at the bare minimum

In June 2024, youth-led mass protests swept across Kenya. The protests were aimed at mobilising to reject the then proposed Finance Bill, which was taxing essential goods such as sanitary pads and bread.

These protests were unprecedented, as we witnessed parts of parliament set ablaze. These protests were also cross-class, and there seemed to be a 'leaderless' movement that was organising behind the scenes. The Finance Bill was indeed a trigger for the underlying problems Kenya continues to face.

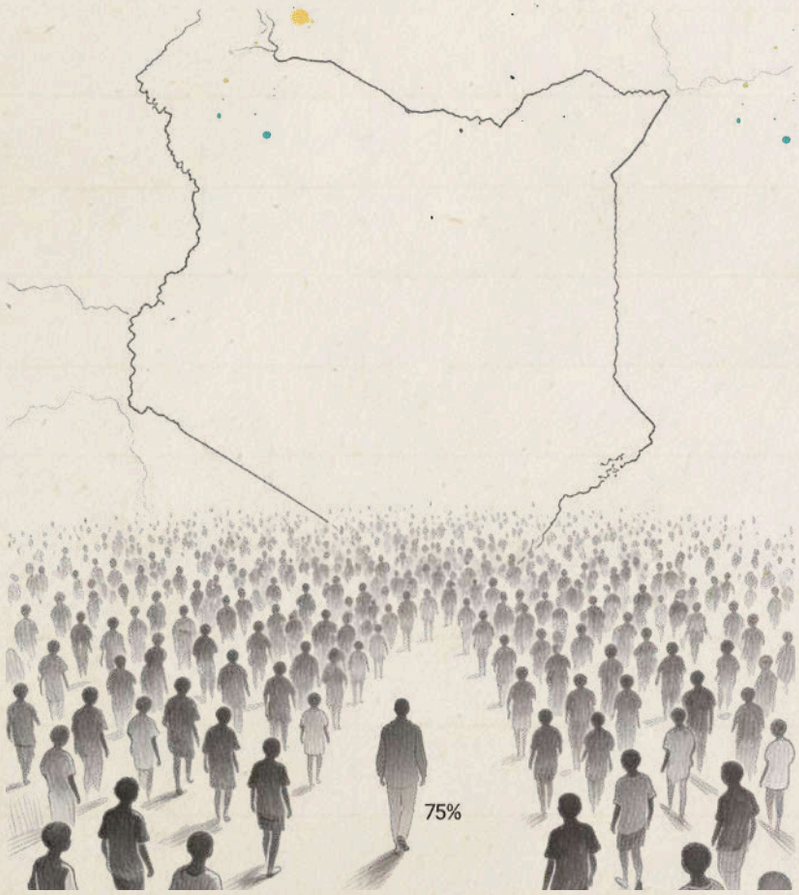
As Nanjala Nyabola aptly describes the situation in Kenya as a 'polycrisis'. What we are currently witnessing in Kenya is indeed the fruit of the neoliberal project, and for more than fourty years, the chicken is coming home to roost.

Noosim Naimasiah, in her essay, Azimio La Elimu,[1] emphasised it as follows: 'But the realities of oppressive colonial education, unemployment, debt, unaffordable education, autocracy, finite resources and opportunities reserved for the affluent have punctured the aspirations and desires that refused stubbornly to materialize.'



Gen Z has inherited a world economy fundamentally shaped by neoliberal restructuring.
The youth have been exposed to several crises, and now they are confronting a labour market characterised by exploitation and economic security has become an impossible aspiration.

Nanjala Nyabola, in her 2024 article in The Guardian - Describes the situation in Kenya as a poly crisis.
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/01/kenya-protests-finance-bill-government-debt



Kenya's majority population constitutes of its youth, with 75% being under the age of 35 years old.

When it comes to labour and technology, most of the workers building and operating under these tech systems are under the age of 35.

The young people are experiencing the brunt of the harsh working conditions: mental health issues like constant anxiety due to increased precarity, and the graphic content that they are being exposed to and low pay.



It was not surprising that barely five months later after the protests, in late November 2024, there was a proposed Bill, the Business (Amendement) Bill (2024), that had unfavourable elements for tech workers such as protecting foreign investors interests instead of prioritising the rights of workers.

An ad hoc meeting was held and it brought together workers and civil society. It was set up fairly quickly from resources of Civil Society Organsations (CSOs), bringing together workers from different sectors such as e-hailing sector, content moderation, creatives and data labelers. From this meeting, the Africa Tech Workers Movement (ATWM) was conceptualised, the name had not been deliberated upon yet and this was just the beginning of building the movement. One year later, we have seen what.

A movement building looks like. This report documents the journey of the ATWM, and how it has been built alongside civil society. Organisations such as Siasa Place have been instrumental in building worker power, in what Webster (2023), terms as subsitutionism. Where unions are not the only actors in worker organising.

It aims to show the agency that workers have portryayed and movement building over the past year. It also aims to highlight the need for unions to revitilise themselves as they still have significant institutional power. And, ends with the need to urgently address the climate question by workers in the tech sector.

https://www.knbs.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2019-Kenya-population-and-Housing-Census-Analytical-Report-on-Youth-and-AdolescentsVol.XII_.pdf
https://www.pambazuka.org/azimio-la-elimu-reflection-education-self-reliance

How did we get here?





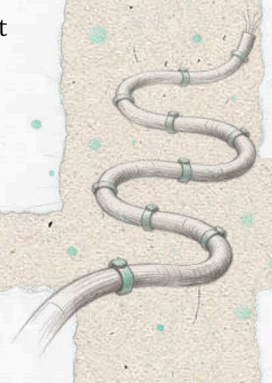
How did this workers movement emerge and why did it emerge in Kenya? There are two main reasons that Kenya emerged the so called ‘Silicon Savanna’.

One is that Kenya pioneered in fintech in the 2000s. Secondly, it is also because English is an offficial language.

This linguistic aspect is important to note because the internet, as is built, relies dominantly on the English language.

Another factor is the rise of physical and digital infrastructure investments of the late 2000s and early 2010s proved crucial to Kenya's tech ascendance.

The landing of multiple undersea fiber optic cables, particularly the SEACOM cable in 2009 and TEAMS in 2010, [1] dramatically reduced internet costs and increased connectivity speeds across East Africa.

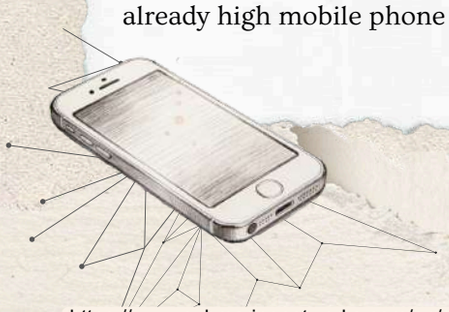


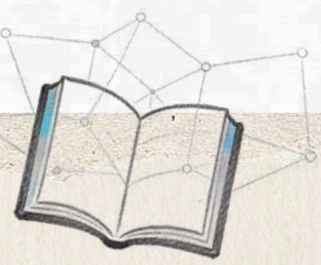
The fintech industry emerged in 2007, with the mobile money transfer services that included the marginalised populations such as women, the unbanked and rural populations.

This proved as a breakthrough in building a people-centred technology. And this also brought a shoot in mobile phone penetration. Subsequently, with the rise of smart phones, there was already high mobile phone use.

AThe Kenyan government's Vision 2030[2] development blueprint prioritized information and communication technology as a key economic pillar.

One of the important aspects of the Vision 2030 that concerns labour when the document was being launched in June 2008 is, ‘setting up of digital villages to provide over 30,000 opportunities for Business Process Outsourcing (BPO).’





https://www.submarinenetworks.com/en/stations/africa/kenya
https://vision2030.go.ke/
https://ukcdr.org.uk/silicon-savanna/



Rome was not built in a day

Bringing workers together at the end of November was only possible because there had been prior ways of organising.

The Africa Tech Workers Movement is a cross-sectoral movement with workers from the e-hailing sector, data labeling and content moderators. There was the existence of loose WhatsApp groups as well as established associations and unions.

This was crucial to build on successes and failures of previous organising efforts.

The different sectors that were represented emerged differently.

The oldest being ride hailing that had also incorporated boda boda riders.

In fact, some of these were also members of the union, the Transport Workers Union-Kenya (TWU-K) which incorporated e-hailing drivers as a way of revitalising itself. The first attempts at organizing platform workers were scattered, localized, and often unsuccessful, but they established patterns and built networks that would prove vital to later efforts.

David Muteru, a member of the African Tech Workers Movement retells the story of e-hailing organising efforts.

That initially, they grew from 'new' workers who were being integrated into the platform economy. And, they faced hostility from the 'traditional' taxi drivers, which was a gate-kept space.

Ironically, he says that they were fighting for platformisation of the taxi industry.

Which allowed them to work, and even provided safety. Yet, several years later, they would be fighting against the low fares, unfair deactivation, algorithmic management and lack of recognition as workers among the issues that they face today. Meanwhile, in the realm of content moderation and data work, a different set of organizing efforts was beginning to take shape.

In 2019, Daniel Motaung, a content moderator working for Facebook through the outsourcing company Sama in Kenya, began organizing his colleagues to demand better working conditions.

They sought higher pay, improved psychological support for the trauma they experienced reviewing disturbing content, and protection from arbitrary termination. Motaung was fired, and Sama took legal action against him, but his case brought unprecedented attention to the conditions faced by content moderators and inspired other workers to organize.

There were several challenges that Motaung faced in his efforts to unionise workers, such as union busting, which was a violation of his constitutional rights of freedom of association.

n March of 2023, 260 moderators were laid off when Sama ended its contract with Meta. 184 moderators alleged that the lay off was a retaliation to their complaints of the working conditions that they complained about.

https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/kenya-content-moderators/





Throughout this period, many workers, especially those from other parts of Africa did not have a means to survive or family to fall back on. It is during this period that Siasa Place intervened, on the basis of this being a human rights violation.

Moreover, this was a youth organisation and most of the moderators were under the age of 35. The immediate need was to distribute food among the moderators, and this was a very practical intervention at the time.

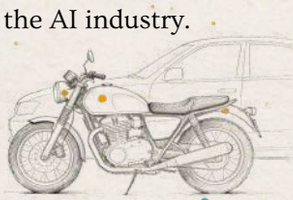
By May 2023, there was an attempt to unionionise, where workers came together in Nairobi, having conceptualised the African Content Moderators Union (ACMU), on May 1 2023. For the data laborers, the network was built by interpersonal relationships, at least initially.

A researcher was exploring the rise of AI hubs and the invisible labour that goes into training the AI.

This work had been ongoing for a long time, as Joan Kinyua, the Data Labelers Association president recalls that she began this work in 2015. Yet, it was not until November 2023, that they were able to come together. This is due to the isolating nature of the work, where some workers perform tasks at home, and they are mostly project based.

Therefore, some data laborers are freelancers and this is not necessarily a full time job for all of them.

It was then that data laborers started coming together to explore collective organising, and airing their grievances with the rise of the AI industry.



The Data Labelers Association was officially launched in February 2025. By the end of 2023, a recognizable pattern was emerging across the platform economy. Workers would experience deteriorating conditions as platforms adjusted their business models to maximize profits. Some workers would begin organizing, often with support advocacy organizations like Siasa Place. It was during this time that the Mozilla Festival took place in Nairobi.

The festival not only allowed for important conversations around equity in tech, but more fundamentally, connections and like-minded people and organisations to align their synergies. Siasa Place, under Project ETHER and Superrr Lab a German Feminist tech organisation conceptualised bringing together tech workers from Kenya and Germany respectfully, to be able to bring workers together to build solidarity and unify based on their demands.

Going Global: The Emergence of Transnational Solidarity

By early 2024, Siasa Place was concerned about what the future of labour and organising would look like.

At the time, the main issues intersecting labour and tech was the lack of platform accountability, and of concern to the organisation, was the human rights violations that were taking place at the time. It was then that Project ETHER was conceptualised (Ethical Tech Ecosystem for Human Rights).

The name itself is rooted in hip hop culture, resonating with the vibrancy of a youth organisation. The meaning of ETHER in hip hop lexicon, means to ruthlessly humiliate an opponent. Project ETHER launched its first report on labour, technology and youth in April 2024.

In August of 2024, the exchange with German content moderators took place in Siasa Place, which was co-organised by Siasa Place and Super Lab with support from GIZ , over 3 days.

It not only connected struggles, but at that time, the workers wrote a manifesto , addressing tech companies and policy makers.

This meeting of data workers that included content moderators and data laborers, unconsciously built momentum towards the November 2024 meeting that eventually birthed the Africa Tech Workers Movement.

These workers are rejecting the old forms of organising that may not necessarily want to include them. Where they are not seen and their issues are not recognised, such as mental health challenges.

Trade unions as they are, remain patriarchal, very few young people engaged and disturbingly bureaucratic at a time where dynamism is much needed to be able to keep up with the rapid expansion of technology.

The new forms of organising require a trans- national collaboration, young people being at the fore, and connection to broader social issues.



https://siasaplace.com/publications/ Taptengelei
https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/kenya-content-moderators/
https://superrr.net/en



Figure 1: Exchange of German and Kenyan data workers at Siasa Place in August 2024

It is important to note that the emergence of this movement has gathered its transnational appeal because of collaborations from other global actors such as the Distributed AI Research Institute (DAIR), who have published worker stories that content moderators and data labelers have documented, and this has gained global attention from their Data Workers Inquiry project.

The documentary 'In the Belly of AI' by Antonio Cassilli , a researcher at Télécom Paris, has helped to bring to light the working conditions of data labeling.

The previous work that was done by researchers from the Southern Centre of Inequality Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, documented union revitalisation of the Transport Workers Union (TWU-K).(Castel-Branco, Mutoro and Webster 2023).

In June 2025, the REAL ML- Research, Engagement, Advocacy and Lived Experience in Machine Learning, engaged with the work of ATWM especially by looking into the link of physical and mental health and the infrastructure of the city. Which is further highlighted in part four of this report.

There are several other researchers and journalists whose interest in the digital economy has increased public interest and awareness on the working conditions within this sector.





https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ether_(song)
https://superrr.net/en/blog/data-workers-demand-safe-and-fair-conditions

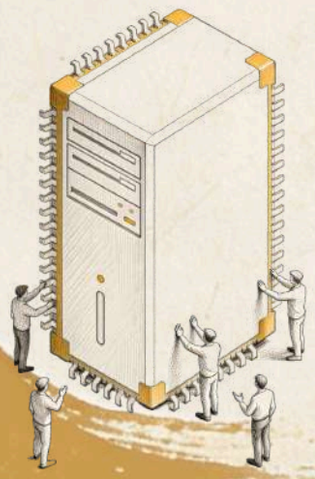
Are We Tech Workers?

This question emerged in April 2025 when workers were deliberating the name of the movement.

This question was asked by workers, perhaps to challenge their own notion of who a tech worker is, or what the public perception of a 'tech worker'.

It is perhaps the tech bro image that we are used to, belonging to a higher tax bracket, and enjoying the privileges of middle class affluence.

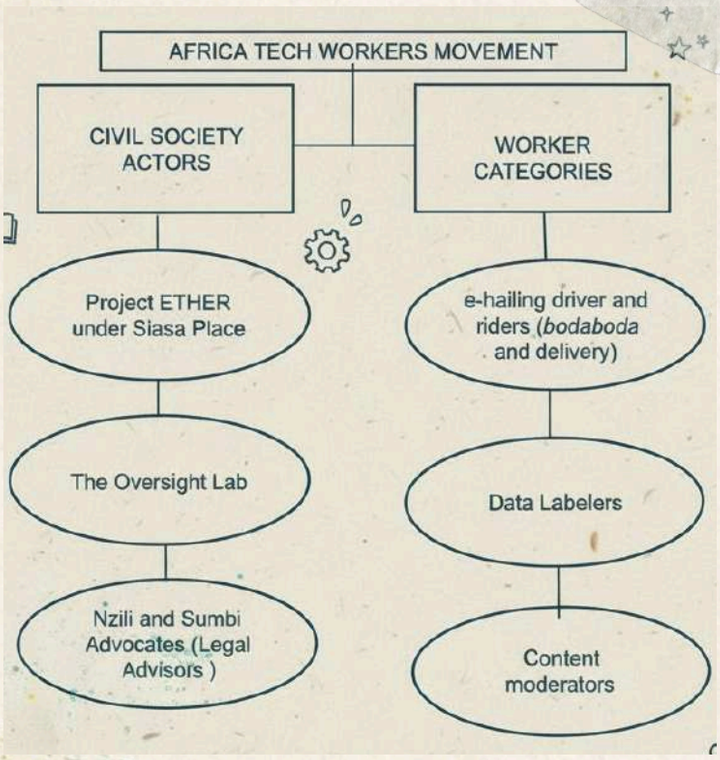
After a lot of debate and contestation, workers agreed that indeed they were tech workers and, it is them that enable the machines to run and generate profit, and information for the tech companies that refuse to make them visible.



The Africa Tech Workers Movement emerged under a different structure that has seen the support of Civil Society Organisations, and the different associations, and loose networks existing under each of the sectors.

Project ETHER, under Siasa Place, the Oversight Lab-a tech-focused organization known for advocacy, litigating, and working on human rights in tech, sometimes challenging tech regulations and platforms and Nzili and Sumbi Advocates that has been representing workers in landmark cases against Big Tach companies form the core of civil society actors who offer resources for community building, advocacy and strategic litigation.

While the workers in different categories are represented by various associations, as well as informal formations.



PART TWO: COLONIALISM IN CONTINUUM



'Sad to see the Old Slave mill, is grinding slow but grinding still'

- Damian Marley,
from lyrics of Slave Mill, Stony Hill Album (2017)

In May 2024, an open letter was sent to President Ruto,

highlighting the concerns of tech workers ahead of his state visit to the United States. In the letter, workers expressed their current working conditions and likened them to modern day slavery.

This continuation of exploitation draws parallels with the history of slavery and colonialism. Black bodies and labour fuelled the industrial revolutions.

The transatlantic slave trade provided the foundational wealth that fuelled European industrialization while colonial systems extracted not only raw materials but also the forced labour necessary to transform those materials into profitable goods. Today's digital economy follows a disturbingly similar pattern.

Jenner's (2024) examination of colonial Kenya during the Depression era reveals sophisticated mechanisms of labour control that parallel contemporary digital labour exploitation.

The psychological dimension of colonial labour exploitation is particularly relevant to understanding modern digital labour.

State enterprises had been strongholds of union organization, where workers enjoyed relatively stable employment, collective bargaining agreements, and strong union representation.

The privatization of these enterprises decimated union membership, as new private owners often resisted unionization, dismissed organized workers, and restructured operations to rely on more precarious forms of employment.

https://siasaplace.com/3d-flip-book/ke-tech-workers-open-letter-to-president-ruto/

Colonial systems did not merely extract physical labour; they sought to reshape workers' identities and self-perceptions through what Tamale 2020, in Decolonization and Afrofeminism, describes as 'internalized colonization.'

These colonial labour systems were characterized by several key features that resonate with contemporary digital labour exploitation.

First, they relied on information asymmetry and deception.

Workers were often recruited through false promises of fair wages and good working conditions, only to find themselves trapped in debt bondage or under contracts they could not break. Second, they involved spatial displacement and control, with workers moved far from their communities or prevented from moving freely, limiting their autonomy and bargaining power.

Third, they operated within legal frameworks that denied workers basic rights and protections while granting employers nearly absolute power. The psychological dimension of colonial labour exploitation is particularly relevant to understanding modern digital labour.

Through a combination of ideological justifications (the 'civilizing mission') and practical mechanisms (education systems, religious conversion, cultural suppression), colonialism attempted to make exploitation seem natural and inevitable.

Workers were taught that their subordinate position reflected their inherent inferiority rather than structural injustice.

This psychological colonization persists in contemporary narratives that present digital platform labour as 'opportunity' and 'entrepreneurship' for the global South rather than exploitation.

The parallels between historical colonial labour systems and contemporary digital labour are striking and systematic.

The Great Depression brought persistent unemployment to Kenya for the first time, which pushed down wages and buttressed colonial capital's profitability.

Yet unemployed young African men threatened white society through potential crime and political organizing.

The colonial state responded through spatial control: arresting these men in the White Highlands and repatriating them to Native Reserves, while simultaneously keeping them attached to the labour force through recruiting, carceral throughput, and what Jenner terms 'fallback position calibration'.

Table 1: Parallels between colonial labour and contemporary platform labour

Dimension	Colonial Labour (Kenya, 1930s)	Contemporary Digital Labour (E-hailing, Content Moderation, Data Labelling)
Health & Safety	Brutal physical conditions, long hours, malnutrition, disease. No workplace safety standards. Workers are viewed as disposable. Health impacts ignored to maximize productivity and profit.	E-hailing: traffic accidents, assault risks, fatigue from long shifts. Moderators: PTSD, depression, anxiety from traumatic content. Labelers: eye strain, RSI, mental exhaustion. Minimal health support across sectors. Long hours, inadequate breaks. Workers are viewed as disposable.
Ideological Justification	'Civilizing mission' - exploitation presented as uplifting Africans. 'Industrious uplift' rhetoric. Workers taught their subordination reflected inherent inferiority, not structural injustice.	'Digital opportunity' and 'gig economy empowerment' - exploitation presented as development. E-hailing: 'entrepreneurship' and flexibility. Moderation: 'gaining skills.' Labeling: 'flexible income.' Workers were taught to accept precarity as freedom, not exploitation. Internalized colonization persists.
Geographic Patterns	Labour extracted from African colonies to create value for European metropoles. Raw materials and labour flow from periphery to core. Profits accumulate in colonial centers.	Labour extracted from Global South to create value for tech companies in Global North. E-hailing: drivers in Nairobi enrich Uber/Bolt investors. Moderators in Kenya/Philippines protect users in US/Europe. Labelers in Venezuela train systems for Silicon Valley. Profits accumulate in core.
Disciplinary Mechanisms	Carceral labour discipline through prisons and detention camps. Workers arrested and imprisoned for minor offenses, then made available to labour recruiters. Punishment integrated into the labour system.	Platform penalties, algorithmic punishment through opacity. E-hailing: sudden deactivation, fare adjustments. Moderators: task rejection without explanation, rating downgrades. Labelers: account termination. Workers punished through loss of income and algorithmic reputation scores.
Value Extraction Pattern	Workers create wealth through their labour but are systematically excluded from profits. Colonial capitalists claimed an increasing share of growing products. Immiseration of workers funds accumulation in metropole.	E-hailing drivers generate billions for platforms, receive declining share. Content moderators protect platform value but pay poverty wages. Data laborers train systems worth billions, and receive a fraction. Platforms capture value created by Global South labour for shareholder profit.
Asset Ownership & Risk Transfer	Workers were forced to provide their own tools, housing in compounds or labour camps. Maintenance costs and risks borne by workers while employers provided minimal infrastructure. Capital accumulation without capital investment.	E-hailing drivers must own/lease vehicles, pay for fuel, maintenance, insurance—all risks transferred. Content moderators provide internet devices in some cases. Platforms accumulate capital without owning productive assets. Workers bear costs and risks.

Dimension	Contemporary Digital Labour (E-hailing, Content Moderation, Data Labelling)	Contemporary Digital Labour (E-hailing, Content Moderation, Data Labelling)
Labour Control Mechanisms	Labour Control Mechanisms	Labour Control Mechanisms
Wage Structures	Systematically depressed wages through unemployment and spatial control. Wages kept at subsistence level while European capital claimed increasing share of profits. Workers' bargaining power eliminated.	Race to the bottom through global labour arbitrage and algorithmic wage-setting. E-hailing: platform takes 25-40% commission while cutting fares. Content moderation: $1.50-3/hour. Data labeling: $1-3/hour. Platform algorithms maintain competitive pressure and wage suppression.
Recruitment Practices	Deceptive labour recruiting with false promises of fair wages and conditions. Information asymmetry between recruiters and workers. Debt bondage and contracts workers couldn't break.	Platform marketing emphasizes 'be your own boss,' 'flexibility,' and 'opportunity' while obscuring harsh realities. E-hailing: promised earnings vs actual take-home pay gap enormous. Opaque compensation structures across all platforms. Workers discover exploitation only after beginning.
Legal Framework	Colonial ordinances (Resident Native Labour Ordinance, Registration of Natives Ordinance) denied African workers rights while granting employers absolute power. Criminal penalties for contract violations.	Platform terms of service deny workers employee status through 'independent contractor' classification. Complex chains of subcontracting obscure responsibility. Existing labour laws don't apply. E-hailing drivers, moderators, and labelers all excluded from protections. Strict Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs).
Worker Rights & Organization	Organizing is criminalized. Workers arrested for attempting collective action. No collective bargaining rights. Violence and imprisonment used to suppress worker solidarity and maintain control.	Terms of service prohibit worker coordination. Account termination (digital deactivation) for organizing attempts. E-hailing drivers face deactivation for strike participation. NDAs silence moderators. No collective bargaining rights. Digital blacklisting replaces physical suppression.
Social Protections	No unemployment benefits, healthcare, pensions, or worker protections. Colonial states pursued 'anti-social policies' to reduce worker security and force wage employment.	Independent contractor status excludes workers from unemployment insurance, healthcare, sick leave, pensions, workers' compensation. E-hailing drivers bear vehicle costs and risks. No benefits or job security despite full-time work across all digital labour forms.





The colonial state responded through spatial control: arresting these men in the White Highlands and repatriating them to Native Reserves, while simultaneously keeping them attached to the labour force through recruiting, carceral throughput, and what Jenner terms 'fallback position calibration'.

This is similar to the post Covid-19 experiences where unemployment has plummeted, the youth are being abducted for protests, and yet they are caught up in wage slavery of precarity. This comparative analysis reveals that contemporary digital labour is not merely analogous to colonial labour systems and it represents a continuation of the same fundamental patterns of racialized extraction, control, and exploitation.

As Tamale argues, these continuities reflect the persistence of coloniality beyond formal decolonization, maintaining global hierarchies through new technological forms .

The information asymmetry is profound. Workers know little about the companies they work for, the purposes their labour serves, or their rights and recourse options. Compensation structures are deliberately opaque. Platforms rarely disclose how much workers will earn per task until after they begin working.

Work is frequently rejected without clear explanation, meaning workers invest time and effort without compensation. Rating and reputation systems that determine access to higher-paying tasks are black boxes

Work is frequently rejected without clear explanation, meaning workers invest time and effort without compensation. Rating and reputation systems that determine access to higher-paying tasks are black boxes

This imbalance of knowledge and power echoes colonial relationships where European administrators possessed detailed information about colonized populations while subjects remained ignorant of the larger systems controlling their lives.

As Tamale emphasizes, decolonization requires confronting such information asymmetries and reclaiming epistemic sovereignty, the right of colonized peoples to produce and validate their own knowledge rather than being objects of study and control.

Most fundamentally, we must reject the technological determinism that presents current arrangements as inevitable.

There is nothing inherent in digital technology that requires exploitative labour practices. The question is one of power and political will.

Drawing on Tamale's vision of decolonial futures, we can imagine digital work organized around principles of collective wellbeing, epistemic justice, and respect for diverse knowledge systems rather than extractive profit maximization.

PART THREE: STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Introduction

The landscape of labour organizing in the twenty-first century presents a profound paradox.

At a time when workers face unprecedented challenges from automation, precarious employment, platform capitalism, and the erosion of traditional employment relationships,

the institutions historically tasked with protecting workers' rights and interests find themselves weakened, diminished in relevance, and struggling to adapt to rapidly changing economic structures.

This chapter examines the critical question of trade union revitalization in the African context, with particular attention to Kenya, and explores how new forms of worker organizing are emerging to fill the vacuum left by traditional union structures.

The imperative to reorganize labour movements is not merely an organizational challenge but a historical necessity.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the decline of traditional trade unionism has created space for innovative forms of worker solidarity and collective action, exemplified by movements such as the Africa Tech Workers Movement.

Understanding this transition requires examining both the historical role of unions in African liberation struggles and the contemporary forces that have undermined their effectiveness, while also considering how new organizational forms might address the unique challenges faced by workers in the digital economy.





Labour Unions as Liberation Forces

Throughout the twentieth century, and particularly during the mid-century struggles for independence across the African continent, labour unions served as fundamental institutions for both organizing workers and advancing broader political liberation movements.

As Webster and Dor (2023) have documented, trade unions were not simply economic organizations concerned with wages and working conditions; they were powerful political forces that challenged colonial domination and fought for national sovereignty.

The labour movement understood that workers' rights could not be separated from broader questions of political freedom, economic justice, and national self-determination.

In the Kenyan context, this interconnection between labour organizing and national politics was particularly evident.

Trade unions played a crucial role not only in securing better employment conditions for their members but also in mobilizing workers as a political force for independence (Durrani 2018).

The unions recognized that their struggle was inherently political, and they actively engaged in shaping national policy, participating in constitutional debates, and pushing for agendas that aligned with worker progress at the national level.

This political consciousness and active engagement distinguished the labour movement of this era, making unions a force to be reckoned with in both economic and political spheres.

The final quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a fundamental transformation in the global political economy, marked by the rise of neoliberal ideology and its aggressive implementation through structural adjustment programs, trade liberalization, and the privatization of state enterprises.

In Kenya, as across much of Africa, this transformation had devastating consequences for the trade union movement. The neoliberal project was, at its core, an assault on organized labour and the collective power of workers.



The Generational Gap in Union Membership

The weakening of trade unions through neoliberal policies created a critical generational gap in union membership that persists to this day.

The millennial generation, born during the height of the Structural Adjustment Programmes and coming of age in an era of precarious employment, largely did not join unions.

This generational disconnect reflects several interconnected factors.

First, the erosion of stable, formal employment meant that many young workers entered a labour market characterized by short-term contracts, informal work arrangements, and gig economy jobs that fell outside traditional union organizing structures.

Second, the weakening of unions during the neoliberal era meant that younger workers often had no direct experience of effective union representation or collective action.

Unlike their parents' generation, who may have witnessed unions winning significant victories and improving working conditions, millennials grew up in an environment where unions appeared ineffective, irrelevant, or absent entirely.

The collective memory and tradition of labour solidarity that had sustained earlier generations of workers was disrupted, creating a rupture in the intergenerational transmission of union consciousness and organizing skills.

Third, the transformation of work itself has created forms of employment that traditional unions have struggled to organize.

The rise of the gig economy, platform work, and digital labour has created a workforce that is geographically dispersed, individually contracted, and classified as independent contractors rather than employees.

These workers often lack the basic labour protections associated with formal employment, yet they also fall outside the organizational models that unions have traditionally employed.

The failure of unions to adapt their strategies and structures to reach these new categories of workers has contributed to their declining relevance among younger generations.



Digitalization and the Transformation of Work

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the nature of work, creating new challenges for labour organizing while simultaneously opening new possibilities for collective action.

The emergence of digital platforms has enabled new business models that depend on the labour of workers who are dispersed, isolated from one another, and often misclassified as independent contractors.

Platform companies like ride-hailing services, food delivery apps, and digital labour platforms present themselves as technology companies rather than employers, thereby avoiding traditional employer responsibilities and labour regulations.

In Kenya and across Africa, the growth of digital labour markets has been particularly rapid. Workers engage in content moderation, data labeling, transcription, translation, and various forms of micro-work through online platforms.

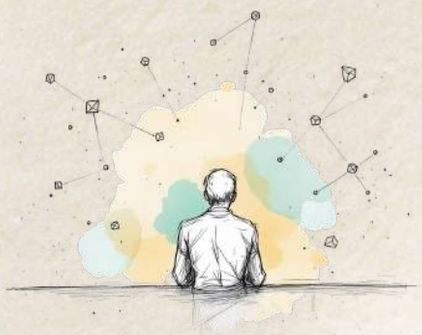
These forms of labour are often invisible, precarious, and poorly compensated. Workers may labour for hours on tasks that require significant skill and concentration, yet receive minimal payment and no employment benefits.

The isolation inherent in this work makes collective organizing difficult, as workers may never meet their colleagues, may not even know who else is performing similar work, and have limited ability to communicate with one another.

Yet digitalization has also created new possibilities for worker organization and solidarity.

Digital communication tools enable workers to connect across geographic boundaries, share information about working conditions, coordinate collective action, and build solidarity networks that would have been impossible in earlier eras.

The challenge for the labour movement is to harness these technologies for organizing purposes while also addressing the specific vulnerabilities and challenges faced by digital workers. Despite the challenges facing traditional trade unions, the fundamental need for collective worker organization has not diminished.



Going Global: The Emergence of Transnational Solidarity

The Persistent Need for Collective Organization



Indeed, in many ways, the intensification of labour precarity, the growth of informal and gig work, and the concentration of economic power in the hands of platform companies have made collective organization more necessary than ever.

Workers in the digital economy face exploitation that is in some ways more severe than previous generations, precisely because they lack the basic protections and collective representation that earlier labour struggles had secured.

The absence of effective union representation has allowed employers to impose working conditions that would have been unthinkable in earlier eras.

Digital workers often experience intense surveillance, algorithmic management, opaque evaluation systems, and arbitrary dismissals.

They work long hours for low pay, with no job security, no benefits, and no recourse when they face injustice.

The lack of collective organization means that workers face their employers as isolated individuals, with no ability to negotiate better conditions or resist exploitation.

This situation underscores the urgent need for trade unions to revitalize themselves and adapt to the realities of contemporary work.

Unions remain the primary institutional form through which workers can exercise collective power, negotiate with employers on more equal terms, and secure legal protections for their rights.

However, to fulfill this role in the twenty-first century,
unions must undergo fundamental transformation.

They must recognize new forms of work, develop new organizing strategies, and address the specific challenges faced by digital and gig workers.

Recognizing New Workers and New Struggles



The failure of many traditional unions to recognize and organize gig workers has created a crisis of relevance for the labour movement.

When unions do not acknowledge platform workers, digital labourers, and other new categories of workers as legitimate members of the working class deserving of representation, they effectively abandon these workers to face exploitation alone.

This lack of recognition is not merely symbolic; it has concrete consequences for workers' ability to organize, bargain collectively, and secure legal protections.

Recognizing new workers requires more than simply opening union membership to gig workers.

It demands a fundamental rethinking of what constitutes work, who counts as a worker, and what forms of collective organization are appropriate for the digital age.

Unions must develop new organizing models that can accommodate the dispersed, precarious nature of gig work while still building the collective power necessary to challenge employer dominance.





Figure 3: COTU Secretary General Francis Atwoli on 21st June 2025
Source: YouTube

Connecting Workers' Struggles to Global Justice Movements

Labour Rights and Climate Justice

On 21st June 2025, the Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU) Secretary General, Francis Atwoli, called for the dissolution of the Nairobi National Park to pave the way for expansion of infrastructural projects.

'....we must expand Nairobi, we must use that National Park around Nairobi, we must take those animals to Masai Mara and we must ensure that Nairobi reflects an international city, like other cities....'

These remarks, from unionists , reflect the disconnection of environmental justice, what development paradigm we should follow as well as colonial logic of what an 'international city' should look like.

Starkingly, the city of Nairobi has seen the reduction of free green spaces over the past decade.

And this has a direct consequence on the well being of especially digital workers.

The lack of free accessible spaces for recreation and rest further impacts mental health, especially after sitting long hours, exposure to graphic content and for the case of e-hailing drivers, not having a safe space to take breaks in the increasing concrete jungle.

The connection between workers' rights and climate justice provides a compelling example of how labour struggles must be understood within broader frameworks of social and environmental justice.

Workers' issues are not separate from the climate catastrophe; they are intimately linked through the global supply chains and production systems that drive both labour exploitation and environmental destruction.

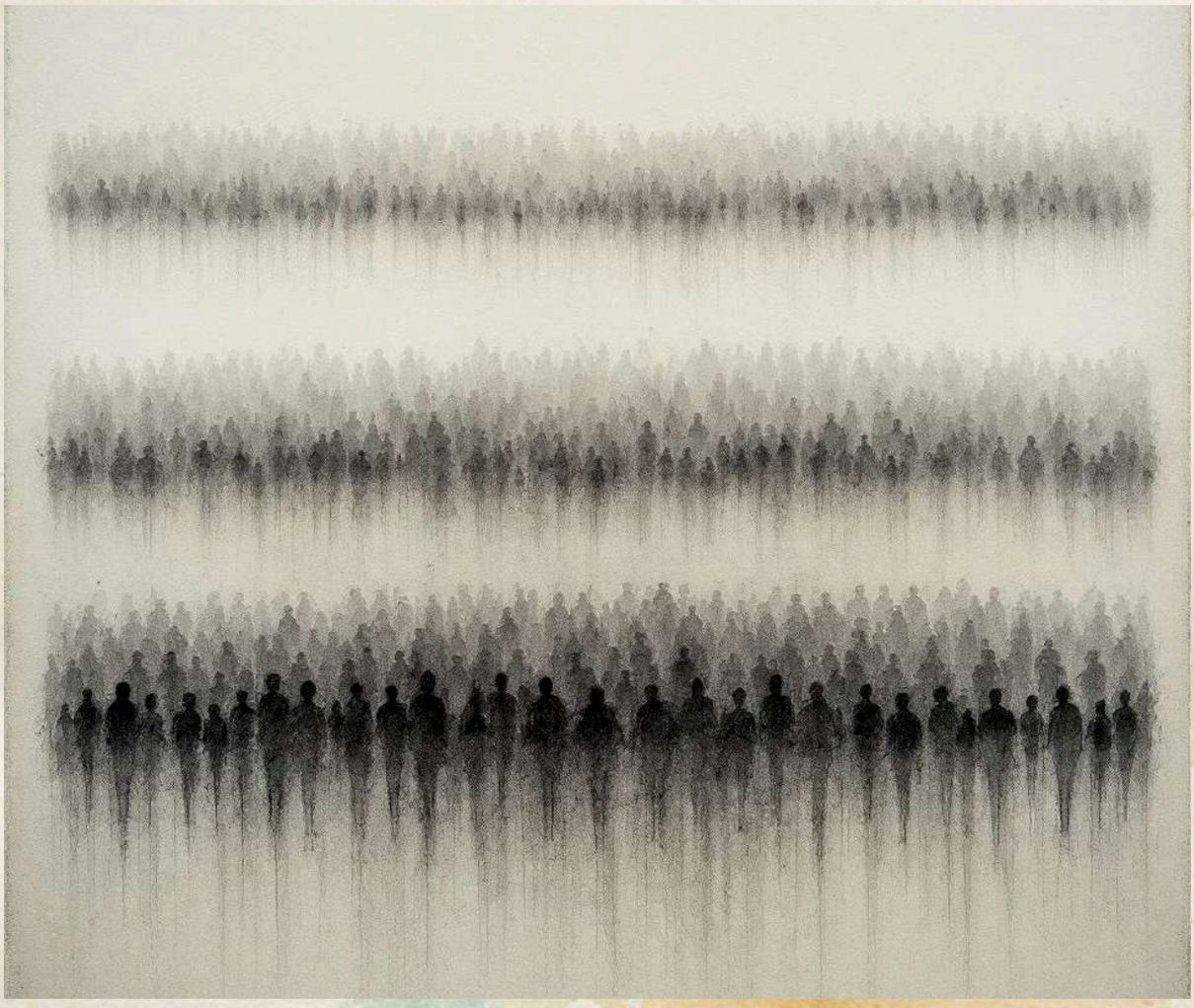
Understanding these connections is essential for building effective solidarity movements and developing organizing strategies that address the root causes of both worker exploitation and environmental degradation.

Consider the case of digital labour and artificial intelligence development. In Nairobi, workers labour to train AI systems through tasks like content moderation, data labeling, and algorithm training.

These workers often earn minimal wages, work in precarious conditions, and receive little recognition for the skilled labour they perform.

Their work is essential to the development of artificial intelligence systems, yet they are treated as disposable and replaceable.

At the same time, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, workers extract the rare earth minerals necessary for the electronic devices that enable these AI systems. These miners face dangerous working conditions, environmental hazards, and exploitative labour relations.



The extraction of cobalt and other rare earth minerals has devastating environmental consequences.

Mining operations in the Congo Basin rainforest contribute to deforestation and environmental degradation, destroying one of the world's most important carbon sinks.

The release of toxins from mining operations creates serious health hazards for workers and surrounding communities, leading to contamination of water supplies, soil degradation, and respiratory diseases.

The environmental destruction caused by mineral extraction affects not only local communities but contributes to global climate change, with implications for people around the world.

This example illustrates the global interconnection of labour exploitation, environmental destruction, and technological development.

The AI systems developed through the labour of digital workers in Nairobi depend on minerals extracted by workers in Congo who face both labour exploitation and environmental devastation.

The profits from these operations flow to technology companies and investors in wealthy countries, while the costs are borne by workers and communities in Africa.

This pattern of exploitation requires organized resistance that transcends national boundaries and connects different struggles for justice.

Expanding the Agenda: Mental Health, Physical Health, and Interconnected Struggles

The transformation of trade unionism for the digital age also requires an expansion of the issues that unions address. Contemporary workers face challenges that extend beyond traditional concerns about wages and working hours. must acknowledge and address.

Digital workers, for instance, experience heightened levels of anxiety and mental health conditions resulting from job insecurity, algorithmic management, and the psychological toll of certain types of work, particularly content moderation.

The isolation of remote work, the lack of social support, and the precarious nature of employment contribute to mental health crises that unions must acknowledge and address.



Figure 4: Labour organiser Chris Smalls. Source: Distilled Blog

Traditional health and safety regulations were developed for industrial workplaces and manufacturing facilities; they often fail to address the specific health risks faced by digital workers.

Unions must advocate for new health and safety standards appropriate to digital work while also ensuring that workers have access to healthcare and support when they experience work-related health problems.

These health issues cannot be separated from broader social and environmental concerns.

As union organizer Chris Smalls articulated in his interview on the Mozilla blog Distilled, contemporary organizing faces a fundamental challenge of connection and integration. "Social movements often operate in isolated bubbles, with activists focused on social injustice, women's rights, or climate change rarely connecting their struggles to labour organizing. And if you're in the labor movement, everybody here is a worker, no matter what job you work for or what industry you work for, you're a worker.

My goal one day is to connect trade unions to all the different movements and make this a class struggle, This is a class struggle. It's 99.9% of us versus the one percent class, the billionaires."

Effective organizing requires building bridges between different movements and recognizing the common structures of oppression and exploitation that unite them."

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PART FOUR: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

The Africa Tech Works Movement: A Case Study

The Africa Tech Works Movement provides a compelling example

- of how alternative forms of worker organization have emerged to address the needs of digital workers in the absence of effective union representation.

The movement's origins reveal the specific circumstances that gave rise to substitutionist organizing. When content moderators employed by Samasource faced dismissal and found themselves without access to basic necessities like food, traditional unions were absent.

Into this vacuum stepped civil society organizations like Siasa Place, which mobilized resources to distribute food to dismissed workers and provide immediate material support.



The intervention of civil society organizations extended beyond material aid. Legal professionals stepped in to represent workers in court proceedings, recognizing that the issues faced by content moderators constituted human rights violations rather than merely labour disputes.

This framing as human rights issues attracted support from advocacy organizations and activists who might not have engaged with traditional labour struggles.

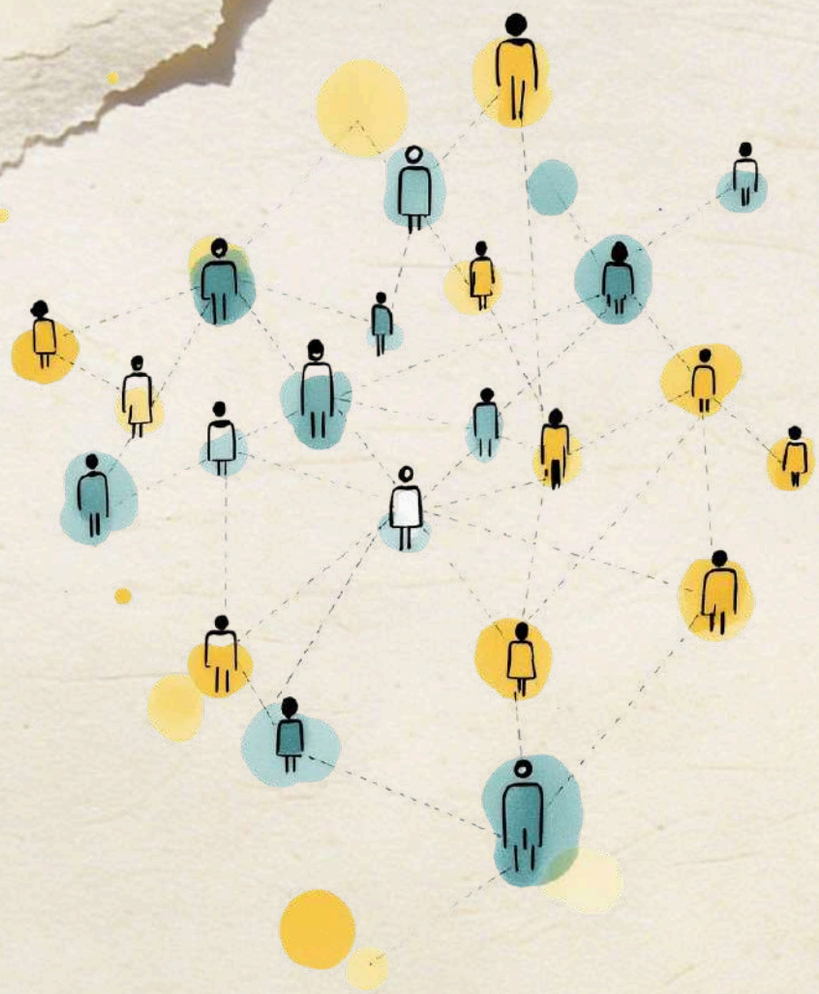
The recognition of content moderation work as a form of labour that could cause severe psychological harm, violate human dignity, and constitute abuse helped to build a broader coalition of support for these workers.

The significance of this substitutionist organizing extends beyond the immediate case of content moderators. It reveals a fundamental failure of traditional unions to recognize and respond to the emergence of new forms of work.



Content moderation, data labeling, and other forms of digital labour have existed for years, yet many unions have failed to develop strategies to organize these workers or even to acknowledge them as legitimate members of the working class.

By the time the Africa Tech Workers Movement emerged in late 2024, digital work could no longer be considered new or unusual; gig economy and precarious employment had become dominant forms of labour for many young workers.



Strengths and Limitations of Alternative Organizations

The alternative organizations that have emerged to support digital workers possess certain advantages over traditional unions.

NGOs and social movements often have more flexibility in their organizing strategies, can respond more quickly to emerging issues, and may have access to different sources of funding and support.

They can frame workers' struggles in terms of human rights, social justice, or environmental protection, thereby attracting support from constituencies that might not traditionally engage with labour issues.

Civil society organizations may also have expertise in areas like legal advocacy, media campaigning, or international networking that complement the traditional strengths of unions.

However, substitutionist organizations also face significant limitations that underscore the continuing importance of genuine trade unions.

NGOs typically lack the institutional power to engage in collective bargaining or to represent workers in formal negotiations with employers.

They may depend on external funding sources that impose constraints on their activities or priorities. Social movements, while energizing and creative, often struggle to maintain themselves over the long term or to build the stable institutions necessary for sustained worker representation.

These limitations suggest that the ultimate goal should not be to replace unions with alternative organizations but rather to transform unions so that they can effectively represent all workers, including those in the gig economy and digital labour markets.

The challenge is to preserve the institutional strengths and collective bargaining power of unions while incorporating the flexibility, creativity, and broader social justice vision demonstrated by alternative organizations.

This synthesis might involve unions partnering with NGOs and social movements, learning from their organizing strategies, and integrating their concerns into a revitalized labour movement.



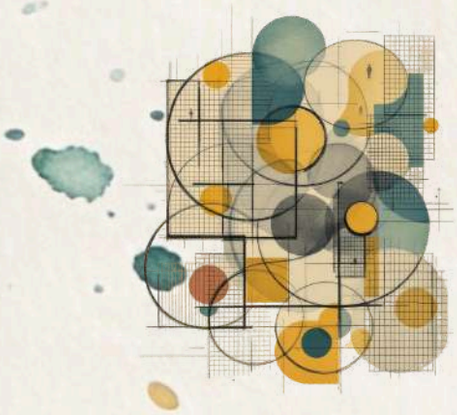
Moving Forward: The Task Before Us

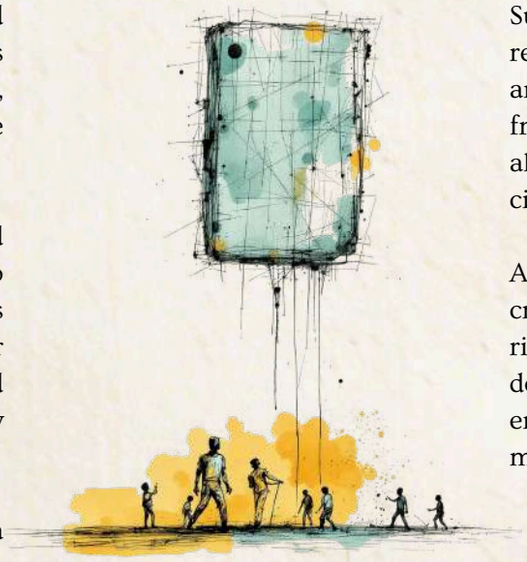
Workers face unprecedented challenges from precarious employment, platform capitalism, algorithmic management, and the erosion of labour protections.

Traditional unions have weakened and have often failed to adapt to changing conditions. Yet, workers continue to demonstrate their capacity for solidarity and collective action through new organizational forms.

The task before us is to build a revitalized labour movement that can effectively represent all workers, address the full range of contemporary challenges, operate at transnational scales, and connect workplace struggles to broader movements for social and environmental justice.

This requires learning from historical struggles while innovating new forms of organization appropriate to the digital age.





It requires building bridges between traditional unions and new organizational forms, between workers in different industries and countries, and between labour movements and other social justice struggles.

The Africa Tech Works Movement and similar organizations demonstrate that such transformation is possible.

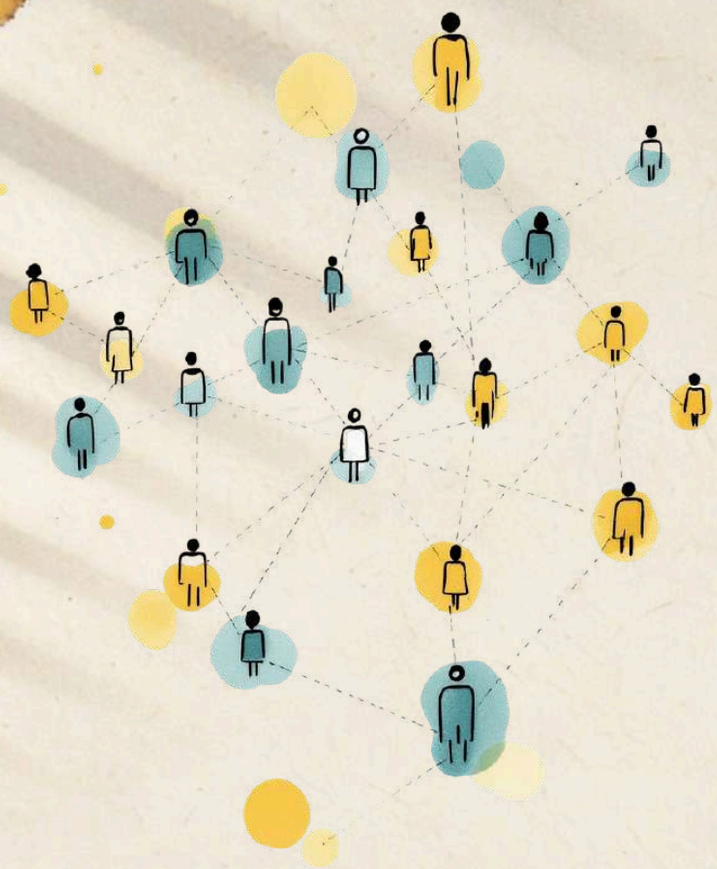
Workers are organizing, building solidarity, and challenging exploitation despite unfavorable conditions.

The question is whether these efforts can be sustained, scaled up, and ultimately transformed into institutional forms with the power to fundamentally challenge corporate dominance and transform working conditions.

Success in this endeavor will require commitment, creativity, and sustained organizing effort from workers, union leaders, and allies in social movements and civil society organizations.

As we face the interconnected crises of precarious employment, rising inequality, environmental destruction, and democratic erosion, a vibrant labour movement is a necessity.





Strengths and Limitations of Alternative Organizations

On Human Rights Day - 10th December 2025, the Africa Tech Workers Movement convened to reflect the past year and plan for the upcoming year.

We documented the achievements of the one year of existence and it reflected hope for the future and what can be done.

The story of the ATWM is ultimately a story about power: who has it, how it is exercised, and how it can be contested and redistributed. The movement represents workers' collective effort to build countervailing power, to assert their dignity and rights.

This report has traced the emergence and evolution of this movement across multiple sectors. The movement matters because it demonstrates that workers in even the most challenging circumstances can organize and win when they act collectively.

The challenges ahead remain formidable. Platforms will continue to resist with all available resources. Legal and political battles will be protracted and uncertain.

Internal divisions may emerge, the building of public attention and empathy may wane and resources for organizing may prove inadequate to the scale required.

But the movement has demonstrated resilience and creativity that they are building organizations capable of sustained struggle.

The ultimate success of the movement will depend on continued effort from multiple constituencies.

Workers themselves must continue organizing, taking risks, and building solidarity across differences.

Advocacy organizations must provide legal support, research, and communications capacity.

Policymakers must pass legislation that protects worker rights and holds platforms accountable. Users of platform services must support workers' struggles even when it means accepting higher prices or reduced convenience.





Taking Stock: One year later

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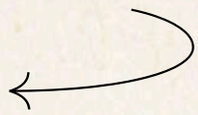
Researchers must document conditions and develop policy proposals. And supporters across society must recognize that platform worker organizing is part of the larger project of building an economy that works for everyone.

Their struggle is our struggle, as the platform economy affects us all as workers, users, and citizens.

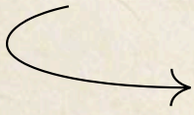
Their victory would be our victory, demonstrating that technology can serve human dignity rather than only corporate profit, that flexibility and security are compatible rather than contradictory, that power can be contested and redistributed even when concentrated in the hands of tech giants.

The future they are fighting for is a future worth achieving: an economy where work provides dignity and security, where workers have voice and power, where technology serves democracy rather than undermining it, where prosperity is broadly shared rather than narrowly concentrated.

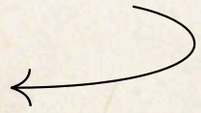
- November 29th, 2024, marked a turning point for digital workers across Kenya. At the Heron Portico Hotel, something unprecedented was taking shape. The response to the Business (Amendment) Laws was urgent. It was civil society actors coming together to brainstorm the best ways to fight back. Unions, youth parliamentarians, civil society organizations, feminist tech advocates, legal minds and workers from various sectors. Project ETHER convened this meeting that would birth the Africa Tech Workers Movement.



- February 2025 : A conversation on the demands of data workers took place online through a webinar. This was a followup on the manifesto that workers had drafted and civil society actors were present, from both Germany and Kenya. The webinar ensured other stakeholders could be engaged and lay the foundation for research and build on global solidarity. It was also in February 2025 that we witnessed the formal launch of the Data Labelers Association.



- March 2025: E-hailing drivers came together from 3 different counties: Nairobi, Nakuru and Mombasa. They came for training on occupational health and safety following a series of deaths of an e-hailing driver. At least 17 associations were represented. Community Health Volunteers did a clinic at Siasa Place premises, where the weight and blood pressure was monitored. They ran through basics such as the need to stretch, take regular breaks and remain hydrated in the course of driving.



- April 2025: Tragedy struck, when a Tik Tok content moderator, Ladi Anzaki died under unclear circumstances. The death of a comrade was a reminder for the need for advocacy work around tech workers. The psychological torment that most of them go through, in silence and in isolation continues to inform the work of ATWM. A vigil was held to remember her life and it was also then that efforts to build cross sectoral solidarity were intensified. Tech workers from the three different sectors were in attendance and the Kenya Union of Gig Workers (KUGWO). It was also in April when a series of consultative meetings took place. This was to write memoranda from each of the sectors represented in response to the Business (Amendment) Bill (2024).

- May 2025: On Workers' Day, May 1, a podcast episode was launched at the Mc Millan Library in Nairobi in collaboration with Until Everyone Is Free. This was advocacy through storytelling and visibilising the invisible labour behind data workers. It was also in May that there was collaboration with the Nawi Collective and other organisations to develop a feminist common position on decent work in the platform economy.



- July 2025: The Data Labelers Association launched a model contract for data work. It established their demands for baseline standards for data labeling work. It is the hope for the tools that can be used by workers to negotiate for fair working conditions.

- August 2025: This month brought both a setback and a response. The Business (Amendment) Bill passed in the Senate without any public participation, a violation of the constitution. And, the response was a swift and co-ordinated press conference by the ATWM publicly condemning the process. The committee members delivered letters directly to the Ministry of Labour and documented their concerns.



- September-November 2025: ATWM entered a phase of strategic consolidation. Committee meetings focused on membership growth, and considering unions as essential partners.

https://siasaplace.com/3d-flip-book/ke-tech-workers-open-letter-to-president-ruto/



From conceptualization in November 2024 to strategic consolidation a year later, the Africa Tech Workers Movement had accomplished what many deemed impossible.

They had:

- Built cross-sectoral solidarity among disparate categories of platform workers
- Established formal worker associations with institutional support
- Engaged meaningfully with national legislation and policy
- Connected local struggles to international labour standards
- Created visibility for invisible labour through cultural production
- Developed concrete standards through model contracts
- Responded tactically to setbacks while maintaining strategic vision
- Identified pathways to sustainable institutional power

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