

The digital economy and precarious work

4.1 Read pages 16-20 of “Working Together: Trade Union and Co-operative Innovations for Precarious Workers.” (7 minutes)

Conaty, Pat, Alex Bird, Cilla Ross, Co-operative College, and Co-operative UK. “Working Together: Trade Union and Co-operative Innovations for Precarious Workers,” Co-operatives UK, 2018.

https://www.uk.coop/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/working-together_final_web-version.pdf (https://www.uk.coop/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/working-together_final_web-version.pdf)

4.2 Watch “Laura Flanders Show: A New Economy for Whom? Palak Shaw and Yochai Benkler.” (Start at 12:00. 13 minutes)

Laura Flanders Show: A New Economy for Whom? Palak S...



Flanders, Laura and TeleSUR TV. “Laura Flanders Show: A New Economy for Whom? Palak Shaw and Yochai Benkler,” video, 25:00, posted by TeleSUR English to YouTube, September 22, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgxACzLj3eA> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgxACzLj3eA&start=720>)

4.3 Read “Platform Cooperativism vs. the Sharing Economy.”

Scholz, Trebor. “Platform Cooperativism vs. the Sharing Economy,” Medium, December 5, 2014.

<https://medium.com/@trebors/platform-cooperativism-vs-the-sharing-economy-2ea737f1b5ad> (<https://medium.com/@trebors/platform-cooperativism-vs-the-sharing-economy-2ea737f1b5ad>)

Conaty, Bird, and Ross take us into a more nuanced and somewhat narrower focus in describing the digital context for the “new normal of the precariat.” Though the emphasis is on the U.K., the trends are global and the implications common—a rentier class (a group of people who derived their incomes from the ownership of property) bent on profit maximization, often through new means such as digital platforms (e.g., Uber, Task Rabbit, Lyft, AirBnB) that disrupt existing industries and increase the marginalization and insecurity of people performing the work. We’ll read more of this report later in this module.

Yochai Benkler is a leading thinker exploring the intersection of peer production, digital commons, and the emergence of platform co-operatives as an alternative of corporate platforms. Note his analysis of how Facebook and Google extract value from social relationships and how corporate platforms such as Uber and TaskRabbit extract profit from the on-demand economy through deepening the commodification and risks workers assume. With reference to platform co-operatives, he concludes by posing the important question: are the emerging alternatives offering potential for advancing systems change or are they just another form of capitalism?

Picking up on the first three resources, Trebor Scholz dissects the “sharing economy,” the term coined in the early days of platforms such as Uber. Sharing value(s) turned out to be a misnomer, to say the least. The negative impacts on the security of workers is reinforced with several examples. Scholz then shows that democratically owned platform co-operatives are a key alternative in the digital world of on-demand workers.