

Overview Report

# Care Platforms: Impacts and challenges from a trade union perspective.

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OVERVIEW REPORT

# CARE PLATFORMS

Impacts and challenges from a trade union perspective

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Report commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung &  
the European Federation of Public Service Unions

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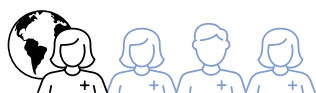
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## Executive Summary

Increasing demand for long-term care (LTC) is a critical issue across the European Union (EU). A preference for independent living and ›aging-in-place‹ approaches have contributed to a greater demand for care in the private domestic setting. This is thus a growing segment of the labour market. The European Institute for Gender Equality (2021) estimates that about 3 out of 4 paid care workers are women, with one in four having a migrant background.



**3 out of 4 paid care workers are women.**



Despite increased attention to the sector during the Covid-19 pandemic, working conditions have not significantly improved, and the societal contribution made by domestic care workers remains undervalued. Government policies aimed at addressing quality care provision have failed to ensure decent working conditions. The general decline in the provision of public services has gone hand in hand with increased privatisation of care services and a growing dominance of market actors in the sector. Care is labour-intensive, and the nature of the work is not conducive to productivity-enhancing technologies.

For unions, organising workers in the sector has always been challenging, given the invisible nature of work performed in private homes. New challenges are emerging for unions. Most notably, digital labour platforms connecting workers

and clients in need of care are increasingly prevalent in the care sector. It is evident that in the digitalised, post-pandemic world of work a new approach to organising workers is required. Precarity of employment for care workers continues to be a concern, with individuals working via platforms taking on additional forms of responsibility in coordinating their work, while having inadequate access to social protection and benefits.

While it is hoped that the Platform Work Directive will address issues such as bogus self-employment, its impact is yet to be seen. Recruiting and organising care workers in trade unions helps them cope with the many challenges they face in the effort to attain quality employment, ensuring their rights are satisfied, and strengthens the voice of care workers. Unions need to find new ways to boost their visibility and interact with platform workers. Our findings reveal, however, that in general unions have not yet developed clear strategies on how to do this for platform workers in the care sector. While some unions have developed strategies on how to address platform work more generally, we find that the nuances of care work add further layers of complexity (e.g. identifying workers, communicating rights, etc.) for unions attempting to organise the sector.

Based on our findings and lessons learnt from other contexts, this research outlines a range of different approaches unions can take to address employment conditions in the care sector, including specific actions in relation to platform work. We present a dichotomy of activity ranging from a focus on lobbying and regulation to actions aimed specifically at platform work or the wider care sector. We discuss approaches unions can adopt recruiting and organising care workers as well as strategies for extending collective bargaining. The report concludes with observations and issues warranting further consideration.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

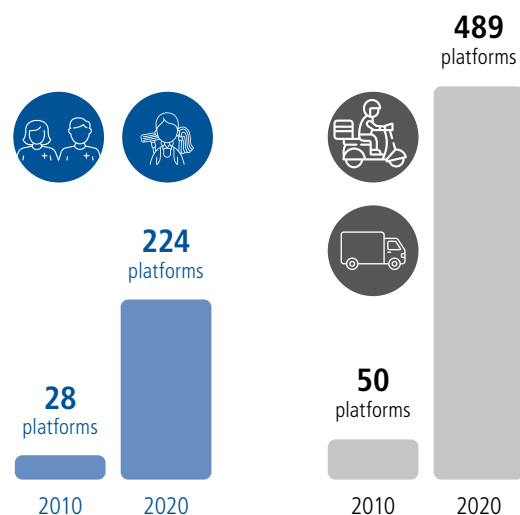
The aim of this report is to review the growing phenomenon of digital platforms in the provision of care in terms of the impact it has, and challenges it creates for trade unions. We outline alternative strategies unions can use to address employment conditions in the care sector, including specific action in relation to platform work, to ensure workers have a voice. We furthermore discuss options for unions in efforts to recruit and organise care workers as well as strategies at the political level.

## 2 DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN CARE

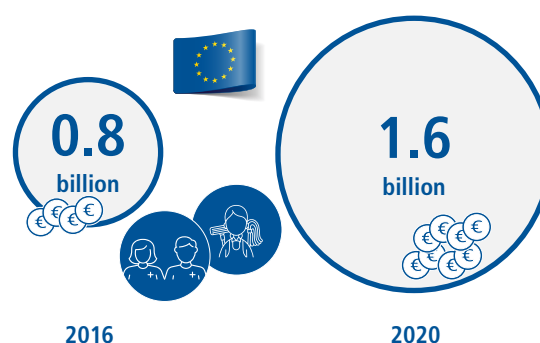
Platforms typically enter markets where regulation is weak, and where public provision of services is largely absent, e.g. private transport for individuals.

The European Council defines platform work as **«a form of employment in which organisations or individuals use an online platform to access other organisations or individuals to solve specific problems, or to provide specific services in exchange for payment».**

Piasna et al (2022) state that digital labour platforms provide a set of tools and services that facilitate the performance of work in exchange for compensation-setting rules, enabling one-off transactions and self-employment rather than creating an employer-employee relationship. **Platform work now accounts for a substantial part of the European labour force. Typical platform workers are young, male and use platforms as a secondary source of income, though 3 million of them do platform work as their main source of income<sup>1</sup>.** While much of the work is considered low-skill, many workers are overqualified for the work they perform (International Labour Organisation, 2021). **While transport and delivery services make up the majority of the platform economy, platform enterprises are increasingly important in the provision of domestic and care work, growing from 28 platforms in 2010 to 224 platforms in 2020 worldwide (ILO 2021).** However, as Flanagan (2019) note, service work involving care and domestic work has only received marginal attention in analyses of the gig economy to date.



The platform economy's entry into domestic care sectors in countries of the global North is seen as a response to the scarcity of affordable quality care services (Rodríguez-Modroño et al, 2022). **The size of the EU platform economy in the domestic and care sector grew from € 0.8 billion in 2016 to € 1.5 billion in 2020 (Marzo, 2023).** Rodríguez-Modroño et al (2022) argue that digital platforms take advantage of inequalities of gender, race and immigration status to access a precarious workforce, providing an otherwise unavailable source of income, albeit coupled with precarity, lack of access to social protection and unemployment benefits. The type of tasks performed by care platform workers varies from support with shopping and cooking to more complex personal care-related needs. The platforms generally require carers to have verifiable experience, references, and recognised care qualifications. Despite platforms offering an innovative approach and potential to provide care work differently, a growing literature suggests significant similarities and parallels between care work both in the gig economy and its non-digital counterpart, explaining the continued gendered nature of the work (Ustek-Spilda et al, 2022).



<sup>1</sup> <https://braveneweuropa.com/half-of-platform-workers-have-hourly-earnings-below-the-minimum-wage-research-finds>

Table 1  
Examples of Care Platforms

Country	Care Platform
 Austria	Betreut.at, Curafides
 Estonia	Care Mate
 France	Click&care, Care.com, Yoopies, Allovoisins, Yooji, Ouihelp
 Ireland	Care.com, Home Care Direct
 Italy	Amalia care, Ape domestica, Badacare, Badanter, Baze, Epicura, Ilmiosupereroe, Latuabadante, Lebadanti, Liane Care, Pronto-pro, SOS Badanti, Ugo
 Germany	Marta.de, Careship, Pflégix
 Spain	Cuorecare, Depencare, Cuideo
 Netherlands	Beep for help, Care.com, Charly Cares, Hlprs, HomeWorks
 UK	Curant care, UKcareteam, Bluebird care, Supreme care, Curacare, Goodoakshome-care, valleycare, sweettree

Ticona and Mateescu (2018) found that care platforms typically claim not to be platforms, rather asserting, that they are marketplaces matching workers with those who need care services. Care platforms differ from other platforms in that the person using the platform is often not the person availing of it, but the family of a person who needs care. Once signed up to the platform, clients are given access to a list of carers based on geographical proximity. Digital platforms operate in a number of formats, used either singularly or in tandem (Ustek-Spilda et al, 2022). One type of platform can be characterised as a **piece-rate approach**, where workers are paid only for the tasks completed, with a specific rate being set for each job the platform assigns. Another type is a sort of employment model, with a **base salary topped up with additional piece-rate payments**; alternatively, some platforms operate on the basis of a subscription model, in which workers and/or clients pay a fee to use the platform. Reviewing care platforms in Spain, Blanchard et al (2021) distinguish between two different models: digital placement agencies and **on-demand platforms**. They found that **digital placement agencies** operate like traditional private placement agencies, offering recruitment as well as ongoing follow-up support, charging clients both an initial fee (covering assessment of client needs, matching a carer and meeting legal and registration requirements), and monthly fee (covering administration of the payroll, finding substitute carers if needed and maintaining contact with the worker and family). Blanchard et al (2021) also found variations even within the digital placement agency model, with some platforms excluding clients who only want to use a platform to select a carer and are not seeking an ongoing, formalised working arrangement. In contrast, some platforms limit their involvement to the contract paperwork and registering the carer on the social security system for the client. Another

service provided is the option of formalising the working relationship for families who already have a carer who is working informally (Blanchard et al 2021). While Blanchard found that these platforms tend to specialise in short-term services not intending to create a longer-term relationship between carer and client, a commission-based approach can also encourage the development of longer-term care when it comes to the continuity of care. The Fairwork Foundation has found that some platforms have created financial mechanisms to promote this continuity,<sup>2</sup> for example by taking a higher commission for the first three jobs a worker takes from the same client, and then subsequently reducing this, so that workers find it more financially attractive to retain clients, which also benefits the platform.

### 3 CHALLENGES FOR UNIONS

The potential for platform work to increasingly become the model through which domestic care is delivered potentially creates further challenges for unions in seeking to raise standards on behalf of workers, as it further fuels fragmentation of the sector. Domestic care work is already fragmented and individualised, with little opportunity for interaction between workers, even when they are employed by the same organisation, making it difficult to organise. Our findings suggest that unions continue to prioritise the organisation of domestic care workers employed in the public and non-profit sectors and by private agencies, **while so far a clear strategy to actively address the increasing growth of platform-based work is lacking**. Furthermore, there remains a dearth of union organisation among platform workers more generally speaking.

Several possible strategies for unions exist. The first is a **complete rejection of platform work**, whereby unions' approach is to lobby for broader regulation of work and employment nationally.

The second approach is once again **regulatory in nature**, but focused directly on the care sector. The interpretation and application of the European Care Strategy is of relevance to this approach.

The third approach is to accept that platform work is a growing feature of the care sector and **adopt active organising strategies in response**. The Directive on Platform Work – adopted by the European Council on 11 March 2024 – could be an important support for unions seeking fair treatment and bargaining for workers in line with legislation at national level.

<sup>2</sup> Fairwork (2020) Fairwork Germany Ratings 2020: Labour Standards in the Platform Economy. Fairwork. [PDF] Available at: <https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2020/05/Germany-English-report>.



## CASE STUDY OF IRELAND

In Ireland 38 per cent of care is provided directly by the public sector, and 62 per cent through indirect provision (Department of Health 2022). A 2018 report by the Health Service Executive (HSE), who coordinates domestic care, acknowledged that the greatest barrier to the provision of services in some regions is the inability to obtain staff. Trade unions (SIPTU and Forasa) have actively organised care workers over the past two decades, achieving improvements in conditions such as aligning pay scales for health care assistants in domestic settings (formerly known as »home help«) with other health care workers, securing written contracts, pay bonuses, pension entitlements, and travel allowances (Murphy and Turner, 2014; Murphy and O’Sullivan, 2021). However, these improvements have been difficult to replicate beyond the public sector amidst a growing presence of private providers, which collective agreements do not cover. Vying to secure HSE tenders has now become highly competitive, particularly as the domestic care sector has been identified as a high growth sector in which investors can expect to become profitable within three years (Mulkeen, 2016).

### PLATFORM PRESENCE

To date, there has been limited regulation of care provision in domestic settings compared with residential nursing homes. A new statutory care scheme is being developed, however, which will likely lead to greater regulation. As the regulatory environment in Ireland is currently in flux, this may partly explain the low salience of platform-based care providers in the Irish context relative to other European countries. Nevertheless, international platforms such as Care.com have a presence in Ireland alongside indigenous organisations like Home Care Direct. Ireland has one of the largest rural populations in Europe, while the HSE keeps an approved provider list on a regional basis, so public funds are directed towards particular providers in each region. Therefore, while platforms have a presence, families currently tend to use them more in the form of privately purchased care. While gig-economy-type working arrangements

are not always associated with positive outcomes for workers, working on the basis of this model can produce better outcomes for workers in terms of predictable working hours and travel allowances (provided they have the capacity to negotiate such) compared to working in traditional agencies, where predictable working hours and travel allowances are rarer. Providers assert that the low rate of funding provided by the government contributes to this. By working on the basis of a platform model, workers can liaise directly with clients to set rates of pay / conditions. However, in doing so they forego those forms of protection afforded by an employment contract.

### TRADE UNION ACTIONS

Unions note that while care platforms are not yet a predominant feature of the sector, they are aware that many people use social media tools such as Facebook groups to source work/care and that this could serve as a precursor to platforms. Unions also underscore the level of informality that persists in the sector. Trade unions continue to actively organise care workers, but acknowledge that platforms have not yet been included in this strategy. The complexity and effort involved in organising such a dispersed and difficult-to-identify group is a daunting challenge for organisers. For unions in Ireland, a sectoral approach to addressing employment conditions in areas of work exhibiting strong vocational elements and feminised workforces has proven relatively successful in the past in sectors like early childhood education. A similar strategy of lobbying to create a joint labour committee (a body responsible for negotiating agreements in typically low-paid sectors) could have merits to offer for domestic care work. One of the recommendations emerging from the strategic workforce advisory group for domestic care relates to the creation of an appropriate mechanism to conclude an agreement in the private and voluntary sector with regard to pay and pensions for domestic-support workers and healthcare assistants.



## CASE STUDY OF ITALY

In Italy, 3.9 million people are in need of long-term care. According to Domina (2022), out of expenditures of EUR 33 billion, more than half (50.3 per cent) is spent on cash transfers, while 15.7 per cent goes towards directly provided domestic care. Italy ratified the Convention on domestic workers (n. 189) in 2013. Available workforce demographics aggregate domestic workers (domestic helpers and caregivers), who are typically female, older, and migrant. A professional qualification/title relating to care work, as well as a certain proficiency in Italian, are generally minimum requirements to be listed in family assistant registers. Just over one in ten workers are registered, however. Checks and audits by the state to uncover labour irregularities are rare, as work carried out in private homes is usually not subject to inspections by the Labour Inspectorate. Unique features of Italian unions, which also represent pensioners, leads to »turf wars« because unions represent workers, but at the same time can also include employers among their members.

### PLATFORM PRESENCE

In Italy, a carer is typically found by word of mouth (71 per cent), despite there being several different forms of employment agencies in the sector, and some municipalities keep a register of family assistants which can be consulted by families. Platforms which do not hire workers directly are becoming increasingly common. Some act as a showcase for adverts by carers or clients without being registered as agencies and without brokering the process. Others offer brokerage and in some cases state that they are registered as authorised agencies, while in some cases they do not reference this. We can distinguish between vertical agencies, which only broker caregivers – such as Amalia Care, Apedomestica, Badacare, Badapp, La tua badante, Le Badanti, Epicura or Noi per voi, and transversal agencies, which also broker other professionals or other services (e.g. transporting the elderly), such as FamilyIdea, Ilmiosupereroe, Ugo, Yoopies or FamilyPartner.

### TRADE UNION ACTIONS

Trade unionists report that they have little contact with platform workers in the care sector, attributing this to their lack of visibility and fragmentation: »For us, platform work is a challenge, but we don't quite know what tools are needed to tackle it with. We don't know how to intercept them, but then we don't even know what to propose because we can't offer a platform worker what we do in traditional situations.« (Felsa CISL – territorial level). The importance of raising awareness, both of workers and families, is mentioned frequently. »Campaigns should be made to raise awareness among workers; this has been done with riders. In this case, the campaign could also involve the pensioners' union, to signal the agencies to avoid, but also to promote the agencies – even the platforms – which instead operate in compliance with the law« (Nidil, CGIL – territorial level).

Furthermore, some interviewees draw attention to traditional levers of trade union action ranging from advocacy to collective bargaining. »There are different levels. The first is the regulation of platforms. We are witnessing a hyperregulation of rider platforms and a complete absence of regulation of other platforms« (Felsa CISL, national level). Some unions called for a strengthening of public intervention in the form of economic support for families and promotion of intermediation tools that favour agencies which adopt more ethical behaviour and advocate for more training. »We should also aim at the state level to introduce training courses in vocational schools to take care of the elderly. Let's start with three years and then later you can get to five, but you have to give this job a value, a professionalism, because our young Italians don't want to do this job« (Maids and carers office, CISL, territorial level).

## 4 REGULATING PLATFORMS

Many trade unions question the fairness of platform-based work and view the gig economy as a threat to working conditions generally. At national level, trade unions can be a powerful lobby group; they can influence platform operational models. In the case of domestic work, platforms have been shown to vary their operational models in several ways in line with the demands of national regulations. Koutsimpogioros et al (2023) point to the role of the media in raising awareness of the introduction of platforms. The emergence

of one platform, Helping, was extensively discussed in the media in **Germany and the Netherlands**, in contrast to very little media coverage being devoted to Helping in the **United Kingdom and Ireland**. The authors noted that unions such as IG BAU in Germany referred specifically to Helping when discussing the negative impact of digitalisation on employment relations. Unions therefore need to be cognisant of changes in individual sectors in which platforms are growing and use their media influence to impact the way platforms operate. The effectiveness of this strategy in the **Netherlands** was demonstrated by Helping's decision to no



longer determine the prices set for cleaning, as they risked becoming entrenched in a public relations feud with trade unions (Frenken et al 2017). Indeed, employer associations can be an ally of unions in seeking regulation. For example, the industry association of cleaning companies in **Germany** (Deutscher Industrie Reinigungs Verband (German Industrial Cleaning Association) DIRV) criticised platforms for offering low wages, accusing them of replacing undeclared work with pseudo self-employment (Koutsimpogioros et al, 2023). A clear similarity can be drawn between domestic cleaning work and care in this regard, with unions and established employers sharing similar views.

Through their social partner role, unions can express support for changes in employment legislation that can counteract the negative side of platform operations. Such changes may involve strengthening existing employment legislation and regulation, as for example in **Croatia**. As part of its Act on Elimination of Unregistered Work, digital working platforms are to be recorded in the competent Ministry's register beginning in 2024, with information being listed on issues such as *inter alia* (i) non-registration of the employee with mandatory social insurances, (ii) performance of work without a written employment agreement, (iii) hidden employment relationships.

Significant hope is attached to the EU Directive on Platform Work in terms of its ability to regulate the platform economy through assigning employee status to those persons working via platforms who are not in genuine self-employment. Transposition into national law is important in this regard to ensure that domestic workers are capable of satisfying requirements allowing them to be designated as employees. However, a recent case from **Spain** suggests that the claim of intermediary status may not exclude organisations from the presumption of employment. A court ruled that Clintu Online (which provides a range of domestic services) was controlling and assigning work. Workers were therefore deemed to receive orders and instructions from Clintu and the organisation of the platform placed limits on the services they could provide to clients (Spanish vida, 2023).<sup>3</sup> While the Directive offers one route toward addressing platform work in the care sector, other approaches which focus specifically on care work itself also warrant consideration.

## 5 CARE-SECTOR-FOCUSED ACTIVITY

Trade unions can approach the regulation of standards of employment in care by intensifying and expanding existing organising efforts specifically targeting the value of care as a public good. Care is a driver of social cohesion, sustainable growth, and gender equality. EPSU and national affiliated unions have expressed concerns at the rate of privatisation and general marketisation in the care sector. Curtailing privatisation requires lobbying for change in the face of neoliberal

policies which reduce state provision of services. Many actors share union concerns. Representatives of family and unpaid carers, including Eurocarers at a European level, have expressed concern that publicly provided care services are being eroded across Europe. Care is a public good, and if private providers withdraw because it is not profitable, the absence of a statutory right to, and public provision of care will widen this care gap. Therefore, the formation of alliances of unpaid carers' associations at national level can be an important aspect in seeking policy change in care provision. Unions need to be cognisant, however, that due to the nature of current service provision many family carers operate on the basis of a mixed model of care, relying on both publicly and privately provided care, both funded and unfunded. Therefore, accessibility and affordability of care need to be prioritised in tandem with improved employment standards. Alliances of unions and family carer representatives can be an important force in raising awareness of employment standards. This encompasses rates of pay and additional benefits, the sharing of sample contracts and financial assistance information, such as tax credits for families employing a carer. Additionally, the complex nature of care provision, with intermediaries (either platforms or private agencies) facilitating live-in care arrangements, can blur the lines relating to the duty of care to employees. Persons providing care need to understand who has the duty to ensure that they are safe when they work – the family or the intermediary. This is an issue regarding which unions can campaign for clarity for both workers and families.

Unions can further play a role by lobbying for welfare and taxation reforms to specifically address aging populations and LTC needs. For example, the **German social security system** introduced an LTC insurance (Pflegeversicherung) in 1995, which has recently been reformed. Beginning on 1 July 2023, the rate of contribution to be paid is set to increase. Controversially, legislation distinguishes between people with and without children. People with children are to pay 2.4 to 3.4 per cent depending on the number of children they have, while people without children are to be levied 4 per cent of their gross annual salary.<sup>4</sup> This is based on the fact that people without children have greater disposable income, and that children will later support aged parents, reducing their dependence on public care services, a perspective which is based on the assumption of family-based care to a certain extent. Nonetheless, investment specifically ring-fenced for LTC supports future increases in wages and staffing levels, while in many countries LTC, social and domestic work fare poorly in financial allocations when included in broader healthcare budgets. Lessons can be drawn from the German example in terms of how funding for the sector may be better managed.

<sup>3</sup> <https://spanishvida.com/2023/07/17/company-fined-over-a-million-euro-for-using-self-employed-workers/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://support.personio.de/hc/en-us/articles/6110302747805-Statutory-Long-Term-Care-Insurance-Contributions-Difference-Between-Saxony-and-Other-Federal-States#h\\_01GBA6XME4R3Z9HQJTZ44WE87F](https://support.personio.de/hc/en-us/articles/6110302747805-Statutory-Long-Term-Care-Insurance-Contributions-Difference-Between-Saxony-and-Other-Federal-States#h_01GBA6XME4R3Z9HQJTZ44WE87F)

## 6 EXPANDING REPRESENTATION AND ORGANISING PLATFORM-BASED CARE WORKERS

In other sectors such as transport and food delivery, where platform work has become ubiquitous, union activity has intensified. Unions have actively played a role at both national and European levels in seeking regulation and legislation relating to the achievement of employee status for platform workers, and have otherwise sought to engage with platform workers directly. New ways of establishing contact have become important. **In Germany, Austria and France**, for example, unions have set up physical spaces for riders to meet, rest or repair their bikes and have achieved compensation for riders who use their own equipment.<sup>5</sup> The perception that self-employed and freelance workers are not targets for trade unions needs addressing if platform workers are to consider engaging with unions. Identifying and reaching care workers is more complex than is the case with other platform workers given the nature of their work. However, unions should consider greater use of digital organising tools to reach workers. Social networking sites are used as a method of both sourcing care and finding work. These spaces represent an opportunity for unions to increase visibility and to interact with otherwise difficult-to-reach workers.

In 2019 in **Belgium**, the Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond (ACV), Confédération des syndicats chrétiens (CSC) established the United Freelancers organisation to support freelancers and platform workers. Those members who join pay the same membership fees as employees, but receive services tailored to platform workers' needs, including assistance in the interpretation of the platform's terms and conditions and provision of legal support in some cases. This has contributed to the conclusion of collective bargaining agreements that apply to platform workers and freelancers. In Austria, the transport and services (including health and social care) trade union *vida* has focused on extending membership to freelancers and entrepreneurs through their *vidaflex* initiative. In Denmark, the 3F union and cleaning services platform *Hilfr* signed a collective agreement in 2018. Unions have used tactics such as negative media campaigns and litigation to force the conclusion of collective bargaining arrangements (Ilsøe and Söderqvist, 2022). While not all platforms may be amenable to collective bargaining, from a platform's perspective collective agreements can improve visibility and branding as a socially responsible actor. This may be particularly important in a sector such as care, where clients and workers form strong relational bonds.

## 7 CONCLUSION

While there are problems associated with digital platforms, such as a tendency toward fragmentation of labour and the impact on social protection, it should be acknowledged that platforms offer possible solutions as well. For example, the platform model also allows the emergence of ›digital platforms for the public good‹ not just to enhance and expand existing welfare services but also to bring into being entirely new services that can contribute to the development of a new kind of welfare state (Huws, 2020). Platforms and co-operatives share several characteristics, so a ›quasi‹ or ›hybrid‹ model combining the digital capabilities of one with the locally rooted and social approach of the other has the capacity to significantly alter the care sector for both care workers and care recipients. For unions, being part of the development of such a model represents an opportunity, not least in terms of its potential to formalise undeclared work, where some of the most flagrant exploitation of workers' rights is to be found.

<sup>5</sup> Social Europe (2021) <https://www.socialeurope.eu/trade-unions-take-on-platform-companies-in-the-struggle-for-decent-work>

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