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# From Workers' Rights to Digital Borders: The Home Office's New Role in Britain's Platform Economy

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## Abstract

In recent years, the rapid growth of platform work has made a significant contribution to the UK economy. Revenues have soared, with the delivery and taxi services leading the way, and the number of people engaged in this sector has grown dramatically. However, despite the apparent robustness of companies like Deliveroo, Just Eat, and Uber Eats and their narrative of providing freedom and flexibility to their workers, the economic and ideological sustainability of the gig economy model is questionable.

These companies increasingly rely on the unstable, work-intensive, and poorly paid labour of a small pool of racially minoritised workers, many of whom have precarious legal status. Yet, for many low-income migrant workers, this sector also presents unique opportunities: the low-threshold onboarding processes, the ability to cash out whenever needed, and the 'substitution clause' allowing account sharing make digital platforms appealing to many of them.

However, in a context of regulatory divergence between the UK and the EU, with the latter moving towards enhanced protection and the former shifting toward an increasingly deregulated gig-economy model, food delivery platforms are becoming a contentious arena for various stakeholders. While companies and migrant workers seek to maximise benefits and opportunities linked to this working niche, trade unions and the Home Office push for greater sector regulation to either defend workers' rights or stop 'illegal working', respectively.

Building on ongoing ethnographic research conducted in Birmingham for the I-CLAIM project (Horizon Europe 2022-2026), this paper explores how shifting political interests, union struggles, and recent judicial decisions have paradoxically produced 'asymmetrical infra-alliances' between parties with opposing political interests, and examines the challenges of building 'equitable alliances' aimed at improving the living and working conditions of migrant platform workers.

Our analysis particularly focuses on the emerging role of the Home Office as the primary regulator of the UK platform economy, especially following trade unions' failure to secure workers' rights to platform workers. Its prominent contribution reflects an attempt to balance surveillance within an increasingly deregulated labour market, with state support to a gig-economy business model, all at the expense of an expendable precarious migrant workforce.

This paper frames these changes in food delivery sector governance as evidence of resurgent hostile environment policies in the UK, which returns labour at the core of immigration

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governance under the new Labour government and transform the food delivery industry into a testing ground for new digital bordering practices.

**Keywords:** platform work, food delivery, migrant labour, UK, immigration governance, digital borders, ethnography