

Opportunities for unions in public markets for irregular work

A growing part of labor markets is unserved by workforce boards, unions and educators. This vacuum around low-skilled irregular workers has created opportunity for exploitative “gig work” platforms, one-sided scheduling tools and under-the-table arrangements.

Stabilizing and upskilling this workforce can become uniquely effective in sophisticated, very granular, marketplaces for hourly labor. They can combine unique market efficiencies (which attract employers) with a potential spectrum of services benefiting workers. Unions are well placed to extend existing services, and pioneer new ones, within these markets.

This memo offers initial thinking on how unions might extend services or initiate new tools and membership models where public markets support this involvement. We welcome further insights.

CONTEXT: The current situation

The scale of irregular work, its current exploitative models, Britain’s development of distinctive public markets, their potential and the challenges of launch are explained at www.BeyondJobs.com.

Irregular Work is skewed towards [the young](#), [women](#), [minorities](#) and [very low--income](#) households. In Britain, where work on public markets for irregular labor started, some of these groups have traditionally questioned how relevant unions were to them. They may now be drawn to working through Uber, Postmates, TaskRabbit or similar services because of a need for extra hours or flexibility around their life commitments. As in shadow economies, these platforms often evade [basic regulation](#) and typically have no place for unions in their labor markets.

Current channels for this labor often don’t work for employers. They drive low quality and churn. Upgrading quality, alignment and opportunities for this workforce requires multiple stakeholders to recognize the needs of irregulars.

Potential responses to irregular work

Unions are currently responding to irregular work in three broad ways, with limited success:

- Lobbying for restrictions: Many labor groups supported [NYC bills](#) enforcing predictable schedules for fast food workers. Already, four states have [outlawed](#) these bills.
- Launching services: In Washington SEIU set up [Carina](#); a marketplace for homecare.

- **New unions:** The [Freelancers Union](#) aims to speak on behalf of all non-standard workers although membership appears to major on traditional freelance professions.

Britain's approach combines the heft of public employment agencies, unions and educators around a much more efficient type of market. UK projects were initially funded by Office of the Deputy Prime Minister under [John Prescott](#). Prescott is a stalwart of labor politics.

Seeking legislative protection or fighting well-funded "gig work" companies is slow. Fair Scheduling Acts which limit employer flexibility creates opportunity for digital [on-demand staffing companies](#) that keep pools of workers waiting for a message each morning telling them if/where they will work that day.

Our strategy was accepting the rise of irregular work as largely unstoppable and creating the fairest markets possible for all concerned. Those markets need to be controlled by local bodies, as workforce boards are now. Local democracy decides who has oversight, which parties are involved and how a platform is shaped.

Online labor markets are not generic. The right technology can create protections, control and opportunities for ad-hoc workers while building a fast ramp to traditional job positions. Employers can be incentivized to develop a pool of workers, facilitate data-driven alignment with their needs and enjoy low-booking overheads. This requires enormous granularity in the market and "market making" before launch. All sorts of services and interventions become uniquely cost-effective when such a market reaches scale.

Potential for unions in public markets

US thinking about how unions might be involved in these markets is evolving. Possibilities include:

- **Extending agreements:** These markets will enforce, and audit, compliance with any agreement. A union might foster pools of flexi-members seeking extra hours or partial work. Work has started on union proposals to employers around this. The members involved could be exposed to competing employers. This could extend to small or non-unionized employers who just want an efficient market. Dues can be seamlessly deducted from each hour sold.
- **Dispute resolution:** Tools for blocking bad employers, or escalating their hourly costs are embedded. It allows incremental sanctions until problems are resolved.
- **Hiring Halls:** If unions wished to act as intermediaries for this very fluid workforce, building a markup into each hour sold, the right platform will uniquely equip them. Training of the workforce could be highly granular.
- **Financial services:** Irregular workers need a range of benefits (which could be pro-rated). British technology (now Americanized) will build these seamlessly into each transaction,

splitting out funds from the timesheet data. We hope to soon explore legal frameworks for a turnkey solution limiting an issuer's liabilities.

- **Use of unsold hours**: All irregular workers have periods when they want to work but no booking is available (this can be minimized with a range of tools). But any spare hours can be exploited for training, peer support, social support or other facility a union might organize uniquely effectively.