

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

My Boss Is A Robot: A Special Series on App-Based

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guests: Lawal Ayobami, app driver in Nigeria; Nobphadach Saleesuk, app driver in Thailand; Arianna Jiménez, journalist, scholar

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Most people have a boss. You know that person you have to answer to at work? Some are good. If you have one of those, cherish them. Platform workers, people who take orders from an app, have an entirely different challenge, where good or bad bosses are irrelevant. Managers are now ones and zeros, programming code shrouded in mystery. So if the AI on your phone tells you to drive off a cliff, are drivers really expected to follow those orders?

Lawal Ayobami:

There was no rest for the driver. They're on the road because they want to make money, and that's why you see some drivers died on the wheel.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Welcome to My Boss is a Robot, a podcast from the Solidarity Center. We're taking on the problems of platform work, from unfair wages to abusive labor practices to tech profiteering, there are so many hazards in the gig economy and we are trying to expose some of them, especially in emerging economies, from Thailand to Nigeria to Columbia.

I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. On today's show, it's the attack of the algorithm.

An algorithm is just a system of rules that a computer follows for every circumstance. One December day in Lagos, Nigeria, an app driver named Lawal Ayobami was just doing her thing on Uber when one of her clients canceled a ride on her. The robot, the algorithm governed by its rules, made an executive decision

Lawal Ayobami:

I was blocked because of the rider's cancellation. So we're always having frequent requests, like before you could even drop someone, you have another request already waiting for you. So in that period of waiting, people just cancel because they can't wait for that period. It might be like 10 minutes to get to them after dropping your current rider. So with that, we have a lot of cancellations.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

She eventually found out that she was blocked permanently.

Lawal Ayobami:

I didn't do anything wrong. I'm not fraudulent, I'm not dubious or anything, so why will I be blocked permanently? Because of the cancellations were getting too much. And I can't force a rider that canceled. If he cancels, that means he doesn't want me as a driver, or he can't wait for the period of the duration to get to him or her. So I shouldn't be the one to get punished for that.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

This is just one of so many stories of drivers that deal with unfair algorithms, which too regularly are programmed to punish drivers at the expense of their own profits. Lawal relies on Uber to support her family.

Lawal Ayobami:

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My adopted son is 21 years in the university. My first daughter is 14 years. She want to be a medical doctor. The second is 12 years. She wants to be a lawyer. And the last is the six years, she also wants to be a doctor

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And what makes this situation so terrible for Ayobami? She takes her job as an Uber driver very seriously.

Lawal Ayobami:

I love every ride to be of good experience. I don't like bad energy. When you come into my car, I want you to be comfortable.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

An online review on Yelp can damage a small business's reputation. Businesses have even sued and won in retaliation. Rating score systems are also prevalent in the service industry, which are also fraught in controversy. But what if there was a rating score applied to platform drivers? Their score was only based on their productivity. This is the case of one platform worker named Nobphadach Saleesuk, who works as a delivery food worker in Thailand.

Nobphadach Saleesuk:

Customer and vendors can give the score to riders, as well as to give complaint on the rider through the customer review. There are five levels. If you level one, you will get the highest pay, which is 20 baht per delivery. If you level five, you get lowest pay, which is 14 baht per delivery.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Speaking through a translator, Nobphadach says his level right now is three, as his rating levels reset every week.

Nobphadach Saleesuk:

You still get the same amount of orders, but the amount of pay will differ, and you get less pay if you get like a bad rating.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Nobphadach constantly works in a state of apprehension that the algorithm will drop his score any given week, which in turn directly affects his weekly bottom line. In order to keep his score high, he believes he must work constantly and consistently six days a week.

Nobphadach Saleesuk:

I wake up around eight o'clock and I start working from 10 o'clock. I work around 10 hours a day. I get home either 10 at night or at midnight.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

He also says the algorithm pushes him to be reckless on the road.

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Nobphadach Saleesuk:

Riders have to drive really fast because our income depends on the number of orders. We want to finish our job as soon as possible so we can get another order as soon as possible as well.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Back in Nigeria, where labor laws are also loose and not regularly enforced, Lawal's hours are also long, long as in 15 to 18 hours a day.

Lawal Ayobami:

My day starts from 4:35. I wake up as early as that to make sure I put myself together and the children. Thank God, one or two that is of age so they can look over for the others. So from 6 a.m., I start work and start driving all over Lagos state. I work until I'm tired at times, like I still people, or until I feel like the money I have now is enough to solve the day's problem.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And just like driving in Bangkok, driving in Lagos is extremely chaotic and dangerous, especially for drivers who aren't protected with medical sick leave.

Lawal Ayobami:

On the road, basically, you actually fight to go to wherever you're going to, because we have six, seven hours traffic in some places in Lagos.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

One study estimated that commuters in Lagos spend 30 hours a week in traffic.

Lawal Ayobami:

The bike man coming driving crazily has to think about the commercial buses, they're the craziest people in Lagos state. So you are fighting to be on the road, to be on your lane, to maintain your lane, to maneuver, you are fighting. And the way we drive here is crazy because we don't even have enough space from the car beside you. That is how crazy it is.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Based on our research, many algorithms unfairly punish drivers who are stuck in traffic. One driver we spoke to says he had to do the exact same drive twice to an airport. The first drive took 35 minutes. The second, stuck in traffic, added an additional 40 minutes of time, totaling an hour and 15 minutes. Yet, the driver says he was only compensated seven more dollars for the exact same drive that more than doubled his time.

Back in Thailand, Nobphadach remembers one night he was on the road working and a drunk driver swerved into his lane, which caused him to fall off his motorcycle. He was injured and couldn't work for a month.

Nobphadach Saleesuk:

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The application did not help anything because before you can get support in term of accident, you have to work longer than six months to get support and there are also other conditions that I did not meet. So I had to pay from my own pocket for my treatment.

Lawal Ayobami:

And that's why you see some drivers died on the wheel. There was no rest for the driver. They don't even go to their family. They're on the road because they want to make money. So he is working and working and working.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Okay, you thought those algorithms were bad? Wait until you hear this. Again, we are back in Thailand with the app driver Nobphadach Saleesuk.

Nobphadach Saleesuk:

I would say the application makes mistake about four to five times a day.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

In one instance, he says the app often notifies him of an order. He goes to open his phone and then the order isn't there. He also says the algorithm not only always miscalculates the time it takes to deliver an order, but also the distance.

Nobphadach Saleesuk:

So when I click to receive the order and I check with the Google Map, it seems that the distance in the Google Map and the distance from the application map is different. The distance in the Google Map, for an example, is five kilometers, but the distance in the application map is always shorter, like three kilometers. But the distance in the application map is like you draw a straight line using a ruler. If you have to drive like that, mean you have to drive through the building to get to the customer.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Did you hear that right? The app expects the driver to literally drive through a building. He believes the programmers of the app had a place like Manhattan or something in mind where streets are on a grid. The algorithm doesn't even account for the winding roads in Thailand. But beneath the sloppy and buggy programming, Nobphadach believes something more corrupt is at play.

Nobphadach Saleesuk:

Regarding the miscalculation of the distance, I think that's not the mistake, they intend to do that because that will reduce the pay and that will reduce the cost for the application. The shorter the distance, the less they have to pay us. But the longer the distance, the more they have to pay us.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Labor activist, Ariana Jimenez, says Nobphadach might be right. The apps are literally designed this way.

Ariana Jimenez:

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Rappi has made a number of changes to the way the application functions that really amount to additional ways to maximize profit in the owner's pockets and minimize what each worker earns.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Remember the Columbian delivery app, Rappi, from a previous episode? They have become a target for scrutiny in the subtle ways they can exploit workers with their algorithm. First, by changing their tip structure.

Ariana Jimenez:

What appears to be widespread practice of wage theft is happening where it used to be 2000 pesos for two kilometers, plus the tip. And so now Rappi is giving the tip to the workers, but they're essentially deducting that amount from the total amount driven per kilometer. So if a worker is driving, for example, two kilometers, they would expect 4,000 COP, plus let's say they got a 2000 COP tip, they would expect 6,000 pesos, excuse me. Now what they're seeing with the wage theft is they will get 4,000 COP, sometimes much less than that actually.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Rappi also rolled out their auto-accept feature. By enabling this function, drivers don't get to pick and choose their delivery orders. Instead, the app automatically accepts the orders for the drivers. But Ariana says drivers who turn off this feature are punished with less work.

Ariana Jimenez:

So this both, getting back to this question of are they workers or are they independent contractors?

Shawna Bader-Blau:

We talked about this in our last episode, how these app companies sell a false idea of freedom to these drivers who get to choose their own schedule. The auto-accept feature completely throws this notion out.

Ariana Jimenez:

This is an employment model. When you are being required to reserve your shift, when you're being required to do that job, you're not an independent contractor making your own business decisions. But it also speaks to a mechanization and an acceleration of the precarity under which these workers seek out a living as the terms of their working conditions and the wages for which they're working are shifting out from under them.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Nobphadach and Ayobami are tired of the way these companies treat their drivers. In 2021, Nigerian drivers for Uber and a similar app, called Bolt, went on strike to protest low wages and working conditions. They wanted the apps to decrease the commission they take on rides. And this year, Nigerian app workers won recognition for their first union. But before that, Lawal and her fellow female drivers started an organization for other women on the road called Ladies on Wheels Association of Nigeria.

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Lawal Ayobami:

We started as a group, actually, as a WhatsApp group, and were able to go and were able to come in numbers, and presently we have over 300 ladies on the association.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Another rampant problem in the industry, sexism and abuse directed at female drivers.

Lawal Ayobami:

So if we have any issue as a lady, if you have any issues on the road, you can just come up on the group and put in your location and whatever happens to you. And before you know it, one or two ladies driver will come to your aid at that time.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Fortunately for Lawal, she was able to build a strong community of female drivers who support each other when dealing with unpredictable apps. Lawal pivoted from her ban on Uber and started driving for another app, Bolt, instead. She is wiser this time around, but she feels the algorithm continues to only protect the customer, to maximize profits, rather than look out for its workers.

Lawal Ayobami:

The first thing they will do is to block you as a driver because a rider had the allegation on you. People just come online, try to start work, and they'll see they have been locked out. What did I do? You hear them saying, a rider reported you. Did you confirm for me? Did you make any investigation to know what happened between me and this rider before blocking me? Are you telling me that the rider has more power? The rider is holding onto my daily bread. Is that what you're trying to tell me?

Shawna Bader-Blau:

But when platform workers stand up for themselves, Ariana says they're confronted with a new challenge—facing an employer that has become invisible.

Ariana Jimenez:

And so in the old days, we would go and we would march on the boss and we would demand better wages or working conditions, and there was a confrontation there that was uncomfortable for the employer. It's much harder to do that under this model where the boss is the algorithm.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

In brighter news, we have a huge piece of news to report on the collective bargaining front. In early February 2023, Nigeria's government gave the green light for app drivers to organize. The Ministry of Labor recognizes the Amalgamated Union of App-Based Transport Workers of Nigeria. That means workers like Ayobami will begin to get the protections and benefits they deserve in this highly unregulated and informal sector. Now it's time for other countries to follow suit.

The pressures of being a woman in the app-based economy are complex and nuanced, but when algorithms rip off their workers and replicate the gender wage gap, women suffer even more.

I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. That's next time on My Boss is a Robot.