

Anita Gurumurthy's inputs at the webinar on

**Data on Purpose 2023: “Making Tech
Work for Workers”**

IT for Change

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The industrial paradigm changed the social organization of work, along with changes to the household structure throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. More recently, the advent of the internet has given wings to economic globalization, making it possible to implement new modalities in global labor arbitrage vis-a-vis offshoring practices, supply chain management, etc.

Furthermore, the past decade has been characterized by the advancement of datafication and automation, processes that are interlinked and yet distinct. While automation has been the original point of contradiction in the labor-capital relationship, computing tech, the chip revolution, and nanotech have accelerated this process.

Meanwhile, datafication is an extractive apparatus par excellence. It ushers in a new form of social organization of work – a hyper-optimization of production relations at both systemic and individual levels. Moreover, the way things work in the brutal reality of digital capitalism, datafication makes old-world tactics to exploit labor look rather crude. The algorithm is the centerpiece of digital capitalism. It is the *pièce de résistance*, which allows for an erosion of labor power – both at the scale of systems and individual control. The information about cities, farms, aggregate labor supply and aggregate consumption on the one hand, and specific profile information about workers on the other hand – as a migrant, as the female supplementary earner, as a student, etc. – is controlled and simultaneously deployed to manipulate, exploit, and disempower by the algorithm. It is a sophisticated and brutish system, bearing a close resemblance to settler colonialism; a people enslaved, their resources pillaged, and their claim to autonomous futures made to seem impossible.

We should know that the system, as it is, is a totalizing force of precarization, pauperization, isolation, and incapacitation for society and workers. The idea of the wage, of conditions of work, and the very idea of work as a social contract is destabilized. We, in fact, go back to square one, with all the social markers of race, gender, class, caste, etc. defining the labor market hierarchy. Furthermore, algorithm as social destiny also means that laws are simply too rudimentary, irrelevant almost in their current form, or at least, in the way they are applied. And for the individual worker, human agency to negotiate in the market is ineffectual, you don't even see a system that you can interrogate. In fact, you may be penalized and simply eliminated from the system.

¹ Stanford Social Innovation Review and Ford Foundation held a webinar titled, 'Data on Purpose 2023: "Making Tech Work for Workers"' on 2-3 May 2023. This document contains the complete text of IT for Change's Executive Director, Anita Gurumurthy's speech at the webinar.

So, What Should We Be Concerned About?

- What does it mean to define rights in relation to labor when data and algorithms become entangled with value? We need to understand the specifics of labor exploitation and unethical business practices – how data is recorded, how it becomes the basis of new markets and trade, how it shapes competition/diversity, and how it is part of a new class of privilege in its links to financialization.
- We should also be concerned about how the dominant model of uberization or amazonification has made it seem like the current system is fait accompli, whereas in reality, social organization in the age of data can be radically different.
- The artificial intelligence (AI) economy and its ruthless polarization of labor markets has made workers in the Global South rather anxious, and they often sign away their data sovereignty in exchange for a few thousand jobs (usually in low-value segments).
- Finally, how we even begin to reclaim older struggles of unpaid work – the work of caregiving, the non-work of life, etc. – when the digital corporation that enjoys so much impunity redefines the social contract as a deal about the survival of the fittest?

What are the Positive Developments for Worker Power?

- Workers are unionizing despite algorithms, using digital tools, and learning to understand how rights must work in the age of data.
- Workers are identifying, naming, and asking for rights, often at huge risk to their own livelihoods. A few of these rights include the right against undue surveillance, the right to disconnect without penalization, the right to basic information about wages (rain pay), the right to leave, the right to have access to data regulating algorithms (transparency, explanation), the right to redressal processes, etc. Additionally, women workers, especially migrant workers, frontline health providers, etc., are at the forefront of labor struggles today.
- Trade unions are working with social movements to highlight how infrastructures of the digital economy need to be autonomous and are demanding data sovereignty and the regulation of transnational corporations. Additionally, digital rights activists and labor unions are pushing governments for data governance and new social security nets, among other things. Furthermore, researchers and workers have come together to show how worker surveillance through social media and wearables undercuts rights. Unions have also set up their own platforms and worked with local governments.

- Laws have tried to keep pace with these developments, but it still remains a long haul for the countries of the Global South. We need to find ways to shape a different economy for a different labor market.

What are the Challenges Ahead?

- States are unable to pay for social security/investments in health and other infrastructure.
- Social space and democracy are subsumed within the globalized marketplace of cognitive engineering.
- International development and foreign policy work against the idea of equality.
- Data markets will continue to reflect the preferential treatment of workers in the Global North. For instance, the privacy policy for Ola Cabs in India pertains to customers and not drivers on the platform. This is at variance from Ola's privacy policy for the UK, which specifically provides that the policy applies to both customers and drivers.
- There's a paucity of resources for worker-owned alternatives.
- We face a future characterized by a small class of mobile knowledge workers and a majority of the immobile and disenfranchised class of workers in human-assisted techno workspaces. We need to prepare for a new definition of human capability in the data society.
- Digital transnational corporations need to be held liable.