



WORK2023 Highlights

WORK2023 conference took place 23-25 August at the University of Turku and also in virtual format, and was successful with audience both at the University of Turku and online. Thank you all who participated onsite and online! During the three conference days we heard four plenaries, over 130 paper and poster presentations in 18 streams, one Author-meets-Critics plenary and lots of engaging and good discussions over coffees and lunches.

The theme of the WORK2023 conference, *'Digital Capitalism: Peril and Possibilities'*, characterizes the complexity and increasing interdependence of activities that weave work and economy tighter together in value creation. One of the most prominent and profound form of the changes in the growing interdependency is the transformation in labor relations. This complex phenomenon was elaborated and powerfully exemplified by Dr. **Alex J. Wood** in his opening plenary on *"The politics of platforms: power, precarity and protest"*. Wood showed with examples of how the various aspects of power and dependencies at platforms deteriorate the idea of worker status and stability of employment relations. Dr. Wood resonated the findings of his several projects with political science theories in arguing for more elaborate understanding of contemporary work, and effects of technology and its different aspects, such as growing gig work, to the quality of work and labor relations.

In her plenary on *"Democratizing technological change at work: Collective responses to digitalization and AI"* professor **Virginia Doellgast** addressed the wider picture of contemporary labor relations and the effects of technology such as AI and robotics. Based on several wide empirical studies and industries across Europe and US, professor Doellgast examined the diversifying trends in relationships between labor markets and collective bargaining institutions, and the possible increase in inequality, and changes in job quality. The powerful argument she presented of the uncertainty of the shared economic basis for growth is closely connected in the developments of technology, with

possible increased polarization of skills and autonomy, more prevalent in some industries than others, but sharing the many features of the possible futures of labor relations. Professor Doellgast also addressed her latest research on generative AI and integrated IT and their transformative power in labor relations. She emphasized the importance of inclusive solidarity, constraints on employer exit and collective worker voice as ways of handling the complexity of new technology and its effects in the working life.

The second conference day opened up with the plenary by Professor **Valeria Pulignano**. Professor Pulignano addressed the topic of *"Theorizing adaptations to precarious work in an era of digital transformation"* and argued for the centrality of unpaid labor in ways we understand inequality in precarious work. Professor Pulignano's strong arguments related to two key concepts in her analyses of the relationships between precarious work, inequality and unpaid labor, namely stigma and resilience. Understanding of paid and unpaid labor, as well as precarity in relation to labour time, are crucial in understanding the driving forces behind unpaid labor. Through several empirical studies conducted by Valeria Pulignano and her research team, she showed how the permanent availability, striving for perfection and risk of being punished when declining a gig job, become major issues in understanding the spectre of precarity at work. Professor Pulignano also discussed the importance of distinguishing analytically the variety of situations of precarity, such as non-binary and binary relationships and availability of resources in precarious work as important analytical aspects.

Associate professor **Niels van Doorn** closed the great series of WORK2023 plenaries with his plenary on *"Managing migrant gig workers at scale: A para-algorithmic approach to platform power"* on the third conference day. In his plenary Niels van Doorn addressed several important aspects of how power shapes and regulates the work done at platforms, but also, and more importantly, how we analyze platforms. In his important talk Nies van Doorn addressed the resources of platform

power, and how these resources on the one hand enable and on the other hand shape the algorithmic control on gig platforms. Especially prevalent this becomes in research where migrant gig workers and their resources and possibilities to navigate the algorithmic management systems are analyzed. Associate professor van Doorn used his large ethnographic data and variety of examples to show how the harsh reality and possibilities of migrant gig workers play out under the conditions of 'algorithmic' systems.

In addition to four exceptional plenaries shortly described above, which all valorized the contemporary analyses of digital capitalism, the plenary session of Author meets Critics added another dimension to the palette. The wonderful book by professors **Erin A. Cech** and **Mary Blair-Loy** "*Misconceiving Merit: Paradoxes of Excellence and Devotion in Academic Science and Engineering*" was discussed in plenary session led by professor **Jerry A. Jacobs**. The discussants, professors **Linda Rafnsdóttir** and **Izabela Wagner**, addressed the topic of academic gendered careers and the various aspects of excellence and devotion. Blair-Loy and Cech studied more than five hundred STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) professors at a top research university to reveal how unequal and unfair outcomes can emerge alongside commitments to objectivity and excellence. Professors Blair-Loy and Cech found that academic STEM fields especially shelter cultural beliefs that not only perpetuate the mistreatment of scientists from underrepresented groups but also hinder innovations.

The 18 streams gathered altogether over 130 paper and poster presentations, too many to be detailed in this short abstract. We hope that both the virtual presenters and chairs as well as those present in person found the discussions and streams interesting and rewarding. The full range of streams and papers can be found at the conference pages, and in the abstract book by the Oxford Abstracts. It was great to see working groups and streams that have been active in several conferences over the years, and for that, we thank warmly the Chairs of the streams for all the work you have done both prior the conference and during the

long conference days! It was also great to have new groups meeting at the conference, thank you for joining in.

As we wrote in the conference call, technologies have the power to enable development, offer remedies and bring forward mechanisms for sustainable development and equal worth, but in their various forms, technologies may also create, increase and push forward greater inequalities of different kinds. It is therefore important to continue the discussions and analyses of contemporary working life and its many facets! We hope to meet you all in the next WORK conference in 2025! Until then, let's keep contact!

On behalf of the WORK2023 Organizing Committee

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[WORK2023 Photo Gallery](#)

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