

Disrupting Precarity: An Enquiry into Worker Voice in Nonstandard Employment

by Michael Brian Walker

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of Professor Peter Fleming and
Dr Marco Berti

University of Technology Sydney
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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Michael Brian Walker, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Business at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature of Student

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Date

26-10-2020

This thesis is in the form of a **thesis by compilation**: it includes four distinct papers that are all, at time of submission, completed and either published or under consideration at various journals.

The papers included in the thesis and their current status is as follows:

- **Successful social media resistance: implications for employee voice**

Published in *Labour and Industry* in May 2020.

- **Peer-to-peer online employee voice: Collective action without coordination**

Under Review with the *Journal of Industrial Relations*.

❖ An earlier version was presented as a peer-reviewed paper at the 6th

Regulating for Decent Work Conference at the ILO in July 2019.

- **“You can’t pick up a phone and talk to someone”: How algorithms function as biopower in the gig economy**

Accepted for publication in *Organization* in July 2020.

- **Uber and the problem of regulatory arbitrage**

Published as a chapter of the edited book *Case Studies in Work, Employment and Human Resource Management* in February 2020.

Some formatting changes have been made to make the four manuscripts consistent in appearance without altering their substance.

The thesis also includes four shorter published outputs which arose from the research and which explicate an unfolding understanding of the research. These are inserted as reflections before each of the four major papers:

- **Three things unions can learn from Uber drivers**
- **The Google walkout is a watershed moment in 21st century labour activism**
- **Victoria's Secret backlash over trans and plus sized models is a 21st Century labour dispute**
- **Deliveroo strike win shows gig workers can subvert the rules too**

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PAPERS CONTAINED IN THE THESIS

Papers One, Two and Four are Michael Walker’s own work.

Paper Three was co-authored with Professor Peter Fleming and Dr Marco Berti.

Walker, M., Fleming, P. and Berti, M. (Accepted) “You can’t pick up a phone and talk to someone”: How Algorithms Function as Biopower in the Gig Economy, *Organization*

Michael Walker’s contribution: 70%

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Reflections One and Four were co-authored with Associate Professor Sarah Kaine.

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Abstract

Employee voice implies unions or employer-controlled channels. Many workers do not have access to either. Moreover, the status of employment is itself under pressure with increasing presence of intermediaries between actual power-holders and workers (Weil, 2014; Peetz, 2019), the most extreme of which is the new phenomenon of ‘gig employment’. Employers are less likely to see a reason to engage with workers with whom they do not have an ongoing relationship (Colvin, 2013).

The thesis interrogates this presumed situation of voicelessness in today’s workplaces, specifically in the gig economy. The internet has broken down barriers to employee voice. I observed, through interviews and netnographic analysis, instances of online voice where workers acted collectively and achieved material improvements to their working conditions by so doing.

I also found that algorithmic management acts as a barrier to the effective carrying out of voice. It fragments and isolates workers and, by dehumanising management, displaces worker grievances away from the true source of disgruntlement.

The major contributions to theory are that employee voice can occur, and achieve material results, without any coordinator, and that algorithmic management is an exercise of Foucauldian biopower that deflects many gig workers’ grievances.