

*Original Paper*

Algorithmic Control, Economic Dependence, and Institutional  
Mismatch: A Mixed-Methods Study of Food-Delivery Riders in  
Beijing

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**Abstract**

*The growth of digital platforms has rapidly expanded the food-delivery sector while intensifying concerns about riders' employment status, social protection, algorithmic management, and access to dispute resolution. This study adopts a multi-source mixed-methods design, drawing on 976 judicial decisions involving food-delivery riders across China, including 52 from Beijing, a survey of 482 riders in Beijing, and semi-structured interviews with 20 riders, five platform managers, and five legal practitioners. Only 7.7% of surveyed riders had formal employment contracts. Only 23% had coverage for work-related injuries or occupational injury protection. Moreover, 63.9% regarded platform algorithmic rules as unreasonable. Across the three data sources, riders mainly face difficulties in identifying employment status classification, insufficient social security, algorithmic management disputes, and poor access to legal remedies. Algorithmic control, economic dependence and institutional mismatch constitute important mechanisms to understand the above labor protection gaps. The paper argues for improving employment-status determination standards based on actual control, expanding the coverage of occupational injury protection, and strengthening algorithmic transparency, appeal review, and coordination among multiple responsible actors.*

**Keywords**

*platform work, food-delivery riders, employment status determination, algorithmic management, social protection, institutional mismatch*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

Digital platforms have driven the rapid expansion of online food-delivery and the workforce that supports it. Food-delivery riders have become an important labor group in the urban instant delivery and living service system. Unlike traditional enterprises with relatively stable employment arrangements, the platform usually organizes and distributes labor through digital systems, partners, outsourcing enterprises and service agreements. While improving the flexibility of employment, it also makes the rider's employment status, employment responsibility subject and social security qualification more complicated.

Employment status, occupational safety, social protection and algorithmic management in platform work have become global governance issues. In China's food-delivery sector, platforms, partners, outsourcing companies and riders constitute a multi-layer employment structure. At the same time, the platform continues to affect the rider's labor process through order allocation, delivery time limit, performance evaluation and reward and punishment rules, which increases the difficulty of determination of an employment relationship, social security coverage and access to legal remedies.

Beijing has a large on-demand delivery market, diversified rider employment mode and rich labor dispute practice, which is suitable as an experience field for observing the relationship between platform control, rider dependence and labor legal system. This paper takes Beijing as the main investigation area and draws on labor disputes, judgment results, and legal application characteristics from the national judicial case analysis platform.

### 1.2 Research Questions and Contributions

Against this background, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main characteristics of the employment arrangement, written contract, employment identification and social protection of food-delivery riders in Beijing?

RQ2: How are the order allocation, delivery time, performance evaluation and reward and punishment rules of the platform related to the rider's job autonomy, work stress and perceived fairness?

RQ3: What are the mismatches between the actual control of the platform, the outsourcing employment structure and the current determination of an employment relationship rules, and how are these mismatches reflected in social protection and access to legal remedies?

This paper examines the labor protection status of riders through multi-source evidence, and analyzes the relationship between algorithmic control, economic dependence and institutional mismatch. Its main contributions are threefold, First, it integrates judicial cases, rider questionnaires and stakeholder interviews to provide multi-source evidence from three levels: application of law, labor experience and institutional practice. Secondly, it incorporates algorithmic control, economic dependence, and institutional mismatch into a unified analysis framework to explain the relationship between employment status, social protection, algorithmic fairness and access to legal remedies. Thirdly, combined with the institutional background that China has not yet established a statutory third type of employment status,

this paper discusses the policy implications of employment status identification, occupational injury protection, algorithmic governance and dispute resolution.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *The Identification of Employment Status of Platform Workers*

The identification of platform workers is the core issue of platform work research. Traditional labor law is predicated on the dual division between employees and independent contractors, but platform work has the characteristics of flexible working hours, civil contract form and platform control of labor process, which is difficult to be fully included in the existing classification. Harris and Krueger (2015) put forward the concept of “independent worker,” which advocates the establishment of an intermediate identity between employees and self-employed. Prassl and Risak (2016) pointed out from the perspective of functional employers that although the platform usually positions itself as a technical intermediary, it may assume traditional employer functions in terms of task allocation, labor supervision, compensation determination and discipline management. Therefore, its legal responsibility should be judged based on actual control rather than contract name. Relevant judicial and legislative practices have gradually shifted from contract form to substantive control. In *Uber BV v Aslam*, the UK Supreme Court emphasized the platform’s actual control over working conditions and working processes.

In China, Wang (2021) proposed the analysis idea of “incomplete labor relations,” and Chang (2022) summarized the continuous supervision of the platform relying on digital technology as “technical subordination.” Relevant empirical studies have found that dedicated riders are more likely to be identified as having labor relations, while the proportion of crowdsourced riders is significantly lower (Tu et al., 2025), indicating that outsourcing, partner and service agreement arrangements will affect the subject of responsibility and identification.

### 2.2 *Algorithmic Management and Labor Control*

Algorithmic management is a defining feature of platform work. The platform implements order allocation, route planning, time limit setting, performance evaluation and reward and punishment management through the digital system, and transfers some traditional management functions to the algorithm system. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) highlighted information asymmetries between platforms and workers; wood et al. (2019) further revealed the coexistence of formal flexibility and substantive control; kellogg et al. (2020) summarized algorithmic management as a new type of labor control that changes the way management is exercised. Lee et al. (2015) found that workers will be managed through order selection, route adjustment and informal mutual assistance coping algorithms. In the Chinese food-delivery sector, the rules of delivery time limit, order distribution, evaluation and punishment embody algorithmic control. Chang’s (2022) concept of “technological subordination” similarly captures workers’ continuing dependence on digitally mediated rules.

### *2.3 Economic Dependence and Social Protection*

Riders' economic dependency is embodied in their heavy reliance on a single platform for income generation and job opportunities. De Stefano (2016) pointed out that platform work expands non-standard employment, accompanied by income instability, work risk and lack of social security. Prassl and Risak (2016) emphasized that dependence aggravates workers' compliance. According to the existing research, economic dependence may weaken the actual ability of workers to reject rules, withdraw from platforms and participate in consultations. Insufficient social protection is another core issue. Riders who are not identified as employees are usually unable to obtain work injury, old-age care, medical care and unemployment insurance. The International Labour Organization (2021) recommends the establishment of a basic guarantee system covering different forms of employment. China's relevant guidance in 2021 puts forward that 'incomplete labor relations', which provides policy space for labor remuneration, labor safety and occupational injury protection, but the specific identification standards, platform responsibility boundaries and relief methods still need to be clarified.

### *2.4 Institutional Mismatch and Access to Legal Remedies*

There is an institutional mismatch between the platform work model and the traditional labor law. The current labor law mainly focuses on stabilizing the employment subject, organizational affiliation and direct management, while platform work reorganizes the labor process through algorithmic management, outsourcing and multi-layer agreements. Mismatch is manifested in the separation of platform actual control and contractual liability, the difficulty of traditional standards to identify algorithm control, and the dependence of social security and access to legal remedies on labor relations. As a result, riders face difficulties in labor contracts, social security coverage and relief channels.

### *2.5 Research Gap*

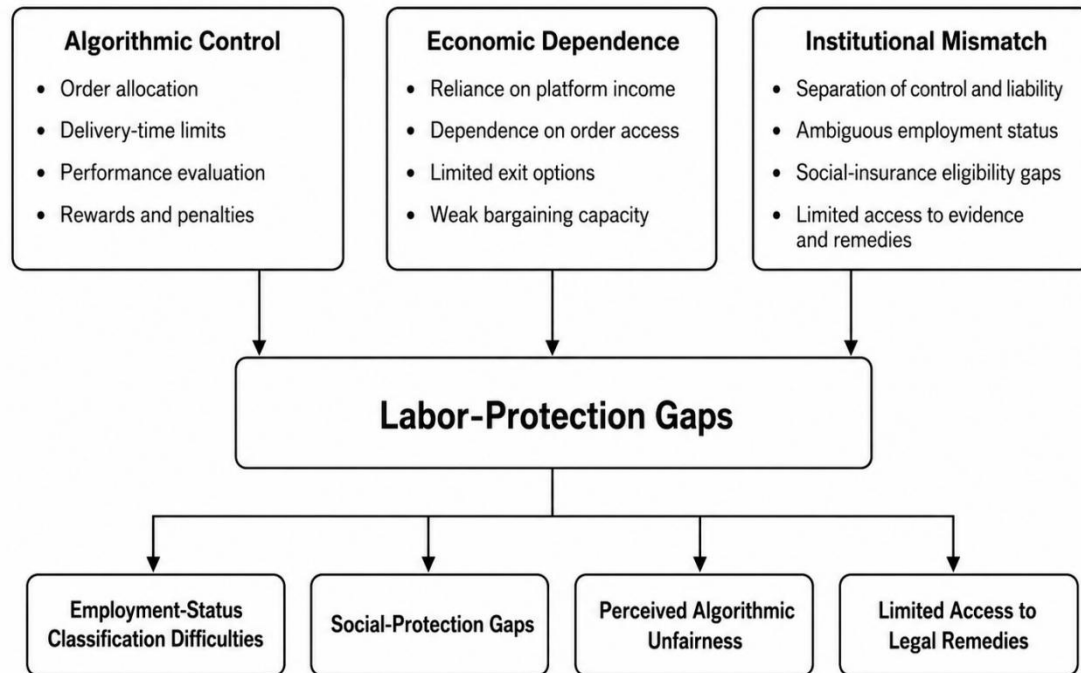
Existing research has discussed platform work issues from the aspects of employment status, algorithmic management, economic dependence and social protection, but there are still three shortcomings: first, the relevant mechanisms are mostly studied separately and lack comprehensive explanation; secondly, there are few studies that combine multi-source materials such as judicial decisions, questionnaires and interviews; third, in the Chinese context, there is still a lack of systematic empirical research on the differences in rights and interests of different employment models and the combined effects of algorithm control, economic dependence and institutional mismatch. Based on this, this paper combines judicial cases, rider questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to construct an analytical framework of 'algorithmic control-economic dependence-institutional mismatch'.

## **3. Analytical Framework and Expectations**

### *3.1 Integrated Analytical Framework*

This paper constructs a comprehensive analysis framework of 'algorithmic control-economic dependence-institutional mismatch'. The algorithm controls the labor management mode of the corresponding platform. The economic dependence reflects the rider's dependence on platform orders

and income resources. The institutional mismatch refers to the lack of adaptation between the actual control of the platform and the existing labor relations, social insurance and access to legal remedies systems, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Analytical Framework of Labor-Protection Gaps in Platform Work**

### 3.2 Core Concepts and Dimensions of Analysis

#### 3.2.1 Algorithmic Control

Algorithm control means that the platform implements order allocation, route planning, delivery time limit, performance evaluation and reward and punishment management through digital system. This paper mainly examines order allocation, time limit pressure, customer evaluation, penalty rules and complaint channels.

#### 3.2.2 Economic Dependence

Economic dependence refers to the fact that the rider's income and job opportunities depend to a large extent on platform order resources. Because this study does not systematically measure the income share of a single platform and the cost of platform conversion, this paper does not use economic dependence as an independent quantitative variable, but mainly based on the rider's full-time or part-time status, income fluctuations, and interviews. Interpretative analysis of statements on order dependence, rejection consequences, and exit options.

### 3.2.3 Institutional Mismatch

Institutional mismatch refers to the lack of adaptation between the actual organization of platform work and the existing determination of an employment relationship, social insurance and access to legal remedies system. It is mainly reflected in the separation of platform control rights and contractual responsibilities, the difficulty of identifying algorithm control by traditional standards, and the dependence of social security and access to legal remedies on clear labor relations.

Based on this framework, the study advances four analytical expectations:

Expectation 1: Strong algorithmic control is associated with limited rider's autonomous space, greater work pressure, and lower perceived fairness.

Expectation 2: Riders who are more dependent on platform orders and revenue resources may have weaker rejection, exit and individual negotiation capabilities; the expectation is mainly interpreted through employment status, income fluctuations and interview materials.

Expectation: When the actual control of the platform is separated from the subject of contract liability, riders are more likely to face difficulties in labor relations identification, social insurance coverage and occupational injury relief.

Expectation 4: When algorithmic control, economic dependence and institutional mismatch are superimposed on each other, riders are more likely to face unclear employment status, insufficient social security, unfair algorithmic management and limited access to dispute resolution.

These analytical expectations are used to organize and interpret multi-source materials, rather than to carry out strict causality tests.

## 4. Research Methods

### 4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a multi-source mixed-methods design, using three types of evidence: judicial cases, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Judicial cases are used to examine the types of platform work disputes, judgment results and legal application; the questionnaire is used to describe the rider's contract signing, work intensity, social security and algorithmic management perception; the interview is used to explain the labor process and institutional reasons behind the quantitative results. The three types of data are first analyzed separately, and then a comparison matrix is established around the four themes of employment status, social protection, algorithmic management and dispute resolution to identify the findings of mutual confirmation, complementarity or inconsistency between the three types of evidence. Table 1 summarizes the research design.

**Table 1. Multi-Source Mixed-Methods Research Design**

<b>Data source</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Analytical method</b>	<b>Main purpose</b>
Judicial decisions	976 decisions, including 52 from Beijing	Content analysis	Employment-status disputes and judicial reasoning
Rider survey	482 riders in Beijing	Descriptive statistics	Contracts, social protection, algorithmic perceptions
Interviews	30 participants	Thematic analysis	Mechanisms and institutional explanations

#### 4.2 Data Source

The judicial case search was conducted in December 2025 and covered cases from 2001 to 2025. The search terms include keywords such as ‘food-delivery rider’, ‘labor dispute’, ‘personnel dispute’ and so on. A total of 1352 documents were initially obtained. After deleting duplicate cases, non-takeout delivery disputes, incomplete factual information and cases unrelated to labor rights and interests, 976 documents were finally retained, including 52 in Beijing. This paper takes the judgment documents as the analysis unit, and the first-instance and second-instance documents of the same dispute are included respectively. Therefore, the relevant statistics reflect the distribution of the judgment documents, rather than the number of completely independent disputes. The two coders independently coded around the identification of labor relations, the type of dispute, the result of the judgment and the legal basis, and the coding consistency was 91%.

The questionnaire was carried out in five areas of Chaoyang, Shunyi, Changping, Fengtai and Haidian in Beijing in December 2025, and was distributed through site recruitment, rider community and offline interception. A total of 482 valid questionnaires were obtained, of which 58 % were Meituan riders, 32% were Ele.me riders, and 10% were other platforms. The questionnaire included demographic characteristics, employment methods, working hours, contract signing, social security, occupational injury risk, algorithmic management perception and seeking redress experience.

The interviewees included 20 riders, 5 platform managers and 5 legal practitioners. The interview was conducted in a one-to-one semi-structured manner, with a single duration of 40-60 minutes. With the consent of the interviewees, the interview materials were recorded and transcribed, and the two researchers independently coded and discussed to resolve differences. All respondents signed informed consent, and the data were anonymized.

#### 4.3 Sample Characteristics and Reliability Test

In the questionnaire sample, male accounted for 68 %, 26-35 years old accounted for 47 %; full-time riders accounted for 58 %, part-time riders accounted for 42 %; junior high school education accounted for 51 %, undergraduate and above accounted for 7 %. There are 22 items in the perception scale,

including algorithm perceived fairness (8 items), work stress perception (7 items) and work autonomy perception (7 items). Items were adapted from prior studies, including Lee et al. (2015) and Rosenblat and Stark (2016), and modified for the food-delivery context. Five subject-matter experts assessed content validity. Before the formal investigation, a pre-test was conducted among 50 food-delivery riders, and several items were revised in response to participant feedback.

Reliability analysis showed that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the three subscales were 0.85 (algorithmic justice), 0.83 (work stress) and 0.81 (work autonomy), respectively, and the total scale  $\alpha$  was 0.87. These values indicate acceptable internal consistency.

#### 4.4 Data Analysis

Based on the quantitative survey data, this study conducted descriptive statistical analysis. The judicial cases adopt the content analysis method to extract the types of disputes, the identification of labor relations and the characteristics of law application; the interview data were analyzed by thematic analysis, and cross-validated with the results of questionnaires and judicial cases.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Analysis of Judicial Cases

The 976 judicial decisions were unevenly distributed across regions: 165 in Chongqing, 96 in Jiangsu and 52 in Beijing. The number of cases in Liaoning, Shandong, Hunan, Henan, Guangdong and Anhui is also relatively large. This distribution may also be influenced by factors such as the size of the rider workforce, the accessibility of court documents, and riders' willingness to pursue legal claims. The causal relationship between the level of regional economic development and the incidence of disputes cannot be directly inferred.

Among the 52 cases in Beijing, the grass-roots courts accounted for 69.23 %, and the intermediate courts accounted for 30.77%. Labor relations disputes accounted for the highest proportion, more than 30%; salary disputes account for about 25%, social security and work-related injury disputes account for 22%, tort liability disputes account for 18%, and disputes involving algorithmic management account for 5%. There are differences in the identification results under different employment modes: the dedicated rider is more likely to be identified as having a labor relationship with the employer, and the proportion of crowdsourced riders is relatively low. After the identification of labor relations, the possibility of riders further claiming work-related injury treatment, wage remuneration and other labor law rights increases accordingly.

In terms of legal application, courts frequently applied Articles 7, 82, and 47 of the Labor Contract Law. In determining whether an employment relationship existed, the court generally refers to the "Notice on Matters Related to the Establishment of Labor Relations" "in 2005, mainly examining whether workers are subject to management, whether they are engaged in paid labor, and whether related labor is part of the main business of employment. However, platform management is usually realized through algorithm system, electronic protocol and outsourcing structure. The judgment documents mainly identify labor

relations based on traditional indicators such as management, compensation payment and business composition, and less directly discuss the management control formed by the algorithmic system.

### *5.2 Questionnaire Survey Results*

The questionnaire results show that the overall work intensity of Beijing food-delivery riders is high. The respondents worked an average of 9.3 hours a day, had an average weekly rest of 1.87 days, and the median daily delivery mileage was about 130 km. Although the rider can choose the on-line time in form, its actual work arrangement is affected by the order demand, income pressure and platform rules.

The labor contract and social security coverage of riders are insufficient. Only 7.7% of respondents (37/482) had formal employment contracts. Among dedicated riders, 27.5% (33/120) had such contracts, compared with 1.1% of crowdsourced riders (4/362). 35.6% of respondents signed labor or service agreements, and 56.7% did not sign any written agreements. After the work-related injury insurance and the occupational injury protection for new forms of employment were included in the calculation, the coverage rate of work-related injury insurance was 23%.

Overall, 63.9% of riders (308/482) considered the platform algorithm rules unreasonable. Among these riders, the most commonly cited unreasonable algorithm rules were compressed delivery windows (78.2%), peak-hour order overload (65.4%), and unreasonable route planning (58.7%).

In terms of perceived fairness and protection risks, about 70% of riders said that they lacked social security, 68.3% thought that income fluctuated greatly, 65.7% thought that the risk of occupational injury was high, and 58.4% reported having experienced algorithmic unfairness. In addition, only 24.7% of the respondents were familiar with labor-related laws and regulations.

### *5.3 Interview Results*

The interview data form four themes around the identification of labor relations, social security, algorithmic management and dispute resolution.

First, the multi-layer employment structure increases the difficulty of identifying labor relations. Most of the surveyed riders enter the platform through partners or outsourcers, and crowdsourced riders usually only sign service agreements. A rider said: "We feel we work for the platform and are managed by them, but the contract says it's a cooperation agreement with a third-party company. If something happens, I'm afraid they push each other." (R03, full-time rider) This indicates that there may be a separation between the actual management of the platform and the subject of contractual liability.

Second, the lack of social security is closely related to the unclear employment status. Some riders only buy commercial accident insurance with daily deductions, and are concerned about the ability to protect major injuries. A rider stated: "Most of us do not have formal social security. We only buy commercial accident insurance ourselves, so we feel insecure." (R04, crowdsourced rider) When the labor relationship cannot be confirmed, the difficulty of obtaining work injury treatment and social insurance rights for riders is further increased.

Third, the algorithm constitutes an important way for riders' daily labor management. The platform evaluates rider performance through delivery time limit, order acceptance rate, customer evaluation and

penalty rules. Riders may still bear the consequences of timeouts during peak hours, bad weather or delayed business meals. One interviewee summed up: “To avoid being late, we sometimes have no choice but to violate traffic rules.” (R02, full-time rider) respondents also generally believe that the actual effect of algorithmic complaint channels is limited.

Fourth, the cost of dispute resolution is high. When a rider encounters a dispute over wages, penalties or accidents, he or she usually can only contact the site or platform customer service. When discussing complaint channels, one rider stated: “We usually go to the delivery station.” (R01, full-time rider) However, for the unclear subject of responsibility or the dispute over the identification of labor relations, site handling is difficult to replace formal legal remedies, and some riders choose to settle or abandon their rights.

#### *5.4 Integrated Analysis*

Across the three data sources, the rider’s labor protection gap is mainly manifested in difficulties in identifying employment status, insufficient social security coverage, algorithmic management disputes, and poor access to legal remedies. Algorithmic control enables the platform to continuously influence the rider’s order, performance and income; full-time status, income fluctuations and platform order dependence reflected in interviews indicate that economic dependence may limit the ability of riders to reject unfavorable rules, withdraw from the platform and negotiate labor conditions; institutional mismatch separates the actual control of the platform from the legal responsibility. The three mechanisms may exist at the same time and strengthen each other, making it difficult for riders to fully obtain the protection of labor law and social security system while being constrained by platform rules.

## **6. Discussions**

### *6.1 Theoretical Implications*

The platform continuously shapes riders’ work rhythm, income, and autonomy through order allocation, delivery time limits, performance evaluations, and penalty rules. This finding aligns with Rosenblat and Stark’s (2016) analysis of information asymmetry and Kellogg et al.’s (2020) discussion on algorithmic management assuming traditional management functions. Food-delivery is also affected by factors such as merchant meal delay, road conditions, and customer evaluation, but the relevant performance consequences are often borne by riders, indicating that formal work flexibility does not necessarily mean substantive autonomy.

The full-time status and income fluctuations in the questionnaire, as well as the rider’s dependence on platform order resources in the interview, together indicate that economic dependence may limit the rider’s ability to reject unfavorable rules, exit the platform, and conduct individual consultations. However, this paper does not directly measure the revenue share of a single platform, platform conversion costs and exit options, so economic dependence is mainly used as an explanatory mechanism in this paper, rather than a fully quantified independent variable.

### *6.2 Policy Implications*

Platform-work governance requires coordinated action on four fronts: identity recognition, occupational injury protection, algorithm governance and dispute resolution. First, the identification of employment status should be shifted from contract form to actual control, comprehensively examining whether the platform has the power of order, pricing, performance evaluation and rewards and punishments, and clarifying the responsibility boundaries of the platform, partners and outsourcing enterprises. Second, the coverage of occupational injury protection is to be expanded, and the payment, treatment and responsibility-sharing mechanism improved, but this is not to replace labor relations identification and social insurance. Third, the platform should improve the transparency of delivery time limit, evaluation and punishment rules, and establish manual review and effective complaint channels. Fourth, for the order, evaluation and punishment data mainly mastered by the platform, the rules of data disclosure and burden of proof should be improved to reduce the difficulty of riders' seeking redress.

### *6.3 Limitations*

The questionnaire and interview in this paper are mainly concentrated in Beijing, and the conclusion cannot be directly extended to the whole country; the research is mainly based on descriptive statistics, judicial content analysis and interview theme analysis, and cannot identify strict causality. There are also deficiencies in the quantitative measurement of economic dependence and the size of interview samples. Future research can combine multi-city surveys, tracking data and platform-generated operational data to test and refine the analytical framework.

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on national food-delivery rider labor dispute judicial cases, Beijing rider questionnaire and stakeholder interviews, this paper examines the employment status, social protection, algorithmic management and access to legal remedies in platform work. The study found that the labor protection gap faced by riders is not caused by a single contract form or management rules, but is closely related to the algorithmic control of the platform, the rider's dependence on order and income resources, and the insufficient adaptation of the existing system.

This paper contributes theoretically by integrating labor process control, economic dependence, and institutional mismatch into a single analytical framework and by explaining how the three mechanisms work together with multi-source evidence in the context of China's food-delivery. This framework helps to go beyond the analysis of platform work relations based solely on the name of the contract.

In terms of policy, the actual control of orders, pricing, performance, rewards and punishments by the platform should be taken as an important basis for identification, and the responsibility boundary between the platform and the cooperative employment subject should be clarified; at the same time, expand the protection of occupational injuries, strengthen the disclosure of algorithm rules, review of complaints and data evidence protection, and form a hierarchical protection mechanism that is compatible with the labor characteristics of the platform.

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