

In Philippines, fears for labour rights as Marcos takes power

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Labour organisers are sceptical that incoming president will prioritise better working conditions in the gig economy.

Manila, Philippines – Even as demand for his taxi service gradually recovers with the waning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Edward is not celebrating. Instead of taking home more money, he is dealing with another threat to his livelihood: rising gas prices.

Over the past two years, as the government in the Philippines enforced strict lockdowns that brought the country's normally buzzing street life to a halt, Edward dealt with a sharp decline in fares while working as a driver for Grab, Southeast Asia's leading ride hailing and food delivery app. To cover expenses for his wife and two-year-old son, he dipped into his savings and borrowed money from an uncle working abroad.

Grab's US-listed shares recently surged 32 percent, and its business is forecast to grow further with more countries lifting pandemic-related restrictions. But as gasoline prices in Metro Manila have risen by 30 percent this year, Edward has been frustrated by the succession of hurdles he has faced, and the lack of a safety net for him and other gig workers.

"It's one thing after another," he said while taking a break from driving in a busy commercial area of Manila.

"I'd thought that things would be better by now, but even though there are more passengers, it's actually getting harder," Edward, who asked that only his first name be used to avoid potential conflict with Grab, told Al Jazeera.

The Philippines labour department estimates that the country's strict COVID-19 lockdowns displaced as many as one million workers, and that many of them turned to gig work seeking alternative sources of income.

Even before the pandemic, a large portion of the Philippine workforce was engaged in informal employment. While pushing for legislation to assist such workers, one legislator estimated that 1.5 million Filipinos rely on informal work, accounting for 2 percent of the population – the highest per capita rate in the world.

Gig workers and other vulnerable classes in the Philippine workforce fear that solutions to their predicament could become harder to reach with the [inauguration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr as president on Thursday](#). Marcos Jr, widely known by the nickname Bongbong, is the son of a late dictator who [suppressed critics and labour organisers](#).

Organisers fear the new administration may be uninterested in cooperating to craft policies that would help workers in the gig economy, such as online tutors and IT workers, as well as rideshare

and delivery drivers.

There are also fears that Marcos Jr could take to persecuting critics the way his father's administration did decades ago.

"We are fearing that under this new government ... our society's democratic space will further shrink, unionism will be further eroded," Raymond D Basilio, a teacher and organiser, told Al Jazeera.

"We are obliged to work with the new government, but are they willing to work with those who are perceived to be their critics?"

As informal employment does not come with benefits or assistance for lean times, analysts and advocates have long called on the government to legislate protections.

"It is high time for the government to implement regulations to protect gig economy workers and their welfare. So far they have been prone to abuse from customers and, to a certain extent, their employers as well," Jan Carlo B Punongbayan, an assistant professor at the University of the Philippines School of Economics, told Al Jazeera.

Companies' responsibility

Along with government, some analysts argue that companies ought to do more for the workers whose labour fuels their growth.

"Platforms manage to externalise responsibility while claiming that they're just platforms, they're just technology companies," Cheryll Ruth R Soriano, principal investigator for Fairwork Philippines and a professor at De La Salle University in Manila, told Al Jazeera.

"Specifically for gig work, platforms need to recognise their responsibility. They should be contributing to this."

Startups are stepping into this gap attempting to offer solutions tailored to gig workers' needs. Amerson Lin co-founded Gigacover in 2017 with the goal of providing a form of paid sick leave to workers.

The company, which operates in Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines and is eyeing further expansion, offers private insurance plans that workers can pay into and draw from when work dries up or illness or injury strikes. Workers can also apply for loans to invest in the equipment they need to take on more lucrative forms of work.

Gigacover says that its services are particularly well suited to workers who spread their work across more than one platform, or switch among platforms seeking better pay or conditions.

"We see the gig economy to be the future of work, but at the same time there are some issues around security, protection, savings and the future of these workers," Lin, Gigacover's CEO and co-founder, told Al Jazeera.

Grab also has its own insurance program for workers. Al Jazeera has contacted Grab seeking comment.

Incoming president Marco Jr takes office facing a slate of urgent economic issues, including rising consumer and energy prices. He will have to balance the need to boost economic growth with calls

to rein in rising inflation and a soaring national debt. Department of Finance Chief Economist Gil Beltran recently estimated that the economy will need to grow by 7 percent annually until 2025 just to outpace growth in public debt.

Soriano, the Fairwork Philippines investigator, says that on the ground in the Philippines, in the absence of reliable state assistance, workers reflexively seek solutions through their own hard work and family networks, regardless of which political party is in power.

“There’s a sense of entrepreneurialism that drives folks to think about themselves, how to take care of themselves, because they know public institutions aren’t going to take care of them,” she said.

“That causes resentment, but there’s a sense that you really just have to find ways to survive.”

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