POLICY REVIEW

Guideline boosts gig worker protections

Government policy provides growing oversight over new employment types

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SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

During campus breaks, Xiao Tang, a university student from Hebei province, takes to Beijing's streets as a ride-hailing driver. A driving enthusiast, he has turned his time off campus into a source of income and a tangible sense of autonomy. "I enjoy it. It gives me control over my time," he said.

His experience is a snapshot of a much larger trend. "Young people across China are increasingly turning to digital platforms for work, forming the backbone of the country's expanding 'new forms of employment'," said Zeng Yanbo, a researcher at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Sociology.

"New forms of employment" are distinct from traditional full-time work, referring to jobs where tasks are matched, assigned, managed and compensated via internet platforms, such as online service provider Meituan, ride-hailing platform Didi and short-video app Douyin.

More than 70 percent of such workers are aged between 18 and 35, according to Zeng. "Young people are drawn to these jobs mainly for the low entry barriers, the quick settlement of income, and the freedom to set their own schedules," she said.

As this workforce continues to grow, the country has introduced a series of policy measures designed to safeguard these workers' rights, improve services and steer the high-quality development of the sector.

In April, the general offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council, China's Cabinet, issued a set of policy measures on strengthening service and management for new employment groups. Experts said that this marks the first central-level policy framework dedicated exclusively to platform-based workers.

They added that it signals a decisive shift for China's digital economy — from a phase of rapid expansion to a new stage of standardized development that balances innovation with labor dignity and security.

According to a survey on China's workforce in 2023, the country has approximately 84 million workers engaged in new forms of employment, accounting for 21 percent of its total workforce. Projections indicate the figure may surpass 100 million this year.

"The new employment group is an important component of China's workforce and an indispensable force for socioeconomic development. It has now become a crucial pillar of the job market," said Zhang Dandan, a professor of economics and vice-dean at Peking University's National School of Development.

Li Yan, 37, from Yuncheng in Shanxi province, has spent a decade delivering food in Beijing. For most of those years, he worked as a freelance courier on major platforms, appreciating the flexible hours but lacking any form of employment security.

A pivotal shift came in March of last year, when he joined e-commerce company JD as a full-time delivery rider.

Despite it currently being a low season for orders, Li said he still earns around 8,000 yuan ($1,180) per month. Beyond the pay, a transformative benefit has been his enrollment in a social security program, with JD covering the employer's mandatory contribution and subsidizing employees' personal contributions. For Li, this security has become a tangible foundation for his future. He said he is committed to building a long-term career with the company, with plans to stay until retirement.

While individual stories highlight the search for security, the sector's overall vitality remains robust. A recent report by Jinan University's Institute for Economic and Social Research in Guangdong province and recruitment portal Zhaopin showed job postings in new forms of employment rose 15.1 percent year-on-year in 2025, while job seekers rose 11 percent year-on-year, with over 80 percent of positions offering monthly salaries between 8,001 yuan and 15,000 yuan.

For years, the explosive growth of platform jobs, hailed for creating employment, outpaced the development of corresponding safeguards. "The core challenge lies in the mismatch between a new, flexible employment model and a social protection system designed for traditional, stable jobs," Zhang said.

The newly issued policy document provides a comprehensive, two-phase blueprint to bridge this gap. The primary goal is to standardize labor practices and ensure robust rights protection by 2027, followed by the establishment of a sound service and management system within the next three to five years.

It has urged internet platforms and express delivery companies to set reasonable wages for workers based on work tasks and labor intensity, and to ensure full and timely payment. Another pillar of the reform is bringing transparency and accountability to the algorithms that govern such work. Platforms are now required to disclose rules for order assignment, pricing, assessment and penalties, according to the document.

While the policy direction is clear, experts caution that its implementation faces deep-seated economic challenges. Zhang identified income as the primary, underlying concern. "For riders, the core issue is earnings from each delivery," she said.

Citing a widespread belief that any new cost levied on platforms — for social insurance subsidies or safety incentives — will be passed down to workers, Zhang said, "Real, sustainable security for workers must be built on a foundation of adequate earnings in the first place."

Alongside safeguards, she stressed that it is essential to introduce measures that curb cutthroat competition and strictly prevent the infringement of workers' rights and interests.

Yin Yu, a senior partner at Guangdong-based Guanghe Law Firm, urged lawmakers to expedite dedicated legislation to protect the rights of workers in new employment forms.

She told Legal Daily that the next critical step is to translate the proven measures outlined in the policy document to binding legal statutes. This legislation, she said, should systematically define the nature of employment relationships, the rights and obligations of all parties, liability divisions, and regulatory oversight responsibilities, thereby solidifying the institutional safeguards for this workforce.

Zeng emphasized the urgency of establishing comprehensive skill standards and structured promotion pathways for delivery riders and similar professions. She advocated benchmarking against the technical worker grading system, a strategic move aimed at elevating these roles from temporary positions to viable lifelong careers.

This transformation, she noted, is essential for providing workers with long-term growth opportunities and fundamentally reshaping the perception and stability of platform-based employment.

Delivery platform reforms prioritize riders' safety over speed

By JI HAISHENG

The removal of late-delivery penalties in early 2026 has marked a turning point for China's gig economy, signaling a shift from speed-first algorithms to worker safety.

For veteran riders like Li Xincang, 39, who has navigated Beijing's streets for over a decade, the shift represents the professionalization of a sector once defined by high-risk labor and social insecurity.

When Li, a native of Puyang in Central China's Henan province, arrived in the capital over two decades ago, he started working on construction sites like many other rural migrants.

"The wages were often delayed, and there were no social security benefits at all," he said.

Seeking a more predictable income, he switched to food delivery in 2014 and has worked for consumer services platform Meituan for almost nine years.

Today, the veteran leads a team of over 110 riders and earns more than 10,000 yuan ($1,470) a month. Earnings are deposited quickly, he said, explaining that part-time riders get paid the next day, while full-time team members receive weekly wages.

"Delivery work won't make you rich, but it can support a family steadily," Li said. The reliable and timely income allowed him to pay off debts of over 100,000 yuan and build a decent house back in his hometown.

Beyond the paycheck, Li cherishes the flexibility. "I can choose to work mornings, evenings, or nights, and manage my own schedule. I can even take a moment to relax if I need, or scroll through my phone during a break," he said. "This is something you hardly get on a factory floor or a construction site."

Li said that the most crucial improvement he has witnessed is the reform of the delivery algorithm, the system that organizes his daily work.

"In the past, we could get up to 12 orders at a time, with very tight deadlines. We had to rush and sometimes even risk traffic violations," he said. Now, influenced by the government and stakeholders, the system limits trips to six or seven orders with more reasonable time windows. "The algorithm now puts safety before speed," he added.

The platform reinforces this by issuing warnings or short-term account restrictions for repeated traffic violations. A pivotal relief came in early 2026 when penalties for late deliveries were removed.

"Riders no longer feel forced to risk their lives on the road," Li said. "This shift has significantly reduced the danger of accidents caused by overwork or rushed deliveries."

This growing sense of security extends from the daily grind to long-term planning. A key milestone was the introduction of a pension subsidy program late last year. Li and his teammates are now covered by the program that subsidizes their participation in basic pension insurance for gig workers.

"Compared with construction work that offers no proper social security, this job gives us a greater sense of security," Li said. "This pension scheme will protect us after we retire. Having it makes my family feel truly at ease."

Support on the ground has also been upgraded. Li praised the launch of hubs dedicated to delivery riders, which offer 24/7 shelter, charging ports and seasonal supplies. However, he is critical of commercial outlets that hang similar signs for show without providing real service and suggests resources should be directed toward stations that genuinely help workers.

For Li, the past decade traces a clear path — from chasing immediate wages to building a stable, secure life with a future to look forward to. He acknowledged his own story as part of a broader shift where the nation's policy direction and corporate initiatives are converging to provide millions with not just an income, but a growing sense of dignity.

Li said he may continue riding for a few more years, or he might return to his hometown to promote local farm produce online, leveraging a following he has built on social media.

He added that his plans remain flexible, while his next steps will ultimately depend on his family's needs.

Policy Digest

Roadmap to cultivate global textile leaders

China will cultivate no fewer than 25 leading textile and apparel brands by 2028 as part of efforts to significantly enhance the competitiveness and market influence of the sector, according to an action plan issued by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and four other departments that was recently publicized.

The action plan for the cultivation of excellence in textile and apparel brands (2026-28) sets out six key tasks, including the categorized cultivation of leading brands across supply chains, industrial ecosystems and consumer markets. Enterprises will be guided to focus on specialized market segments and consumer scenarios to create a group of supply-chain brands and consumer-facing brands.

The plan calls for stronger development of smart textiles, including smart wearables, intelligent home textiles, and products related to healthcare and medical applications.

To promote digital and intelligent upgrading, the plan encourages the release of innovative application scenarios for "AI plus textiles" across the entire industrial chain. It also supports the use of human-computer interaction and virtual interaction to better understand personalized consumer demand, while improving the technological level and wider application of virtual fitting, intelligent outfit recommendations and virtual anchors.

Campaign to uplift rural culture, health services

The Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and 12 other departments recently issued a notice launching the 2026 campaign to bring culture, science and health services to the countryside, aiming to deliver more high-quality resources directly to rural communities.

Under the campaign, cultural and artistic services will be brought to rural areas by mobilizing literary and artistic teams to provide cultural services. Support will also be given to mass cultural and sports activities.

Legal services will be strengthened through regular rural-themed public legal education activities, while agricultural technology services will focus on the needs of rural industrial development.

The campaign will expand science outreach in rural communities through innovative science popularization demonstration activities and high-quality public science content.

Medical resources will be sent to rural communities via free clinic weeks, visits by renowned doctors to grassroots areas, and stationed or mobile medical services at township and village levels, and public welfare services will also be expanded.

Tap water coverage in countryside hits 96%

China's rural tap water coverage reached 96 percent by the end of 2025, the Ministry of Water Resources said on Tuesday.

By the end of last year, large-scale water supply projects covered 71 percent of the rural population, while 72 percent of counties had adopted unified county-level management for rural water supply, the ministry told a press conference.

China had nearly 3.82 million rural water supply projects by the end of 2025, forming a supply network covering 850 million rural residents. The number of people relying mainly on water cellars and water storage tanks for water supply had dropped by 79 percent by the end of last year from the level at the end of the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20) period.

During the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-25), areas lifted out of poverty completed 914.9 billion yuan ($133.71 billion) in water conservancy investment, including 145.5 billion yuan in key counties.

China aims to raise rural tap water coverage to 97 percent by the end of 2026, with large-scale water supply projects covering 73 percent of the rural population, according to the ministry. By 2030, the country aims to lift rural tap water coverage to 98 percent.

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