

IWW Takes on the Freelance Journalist Gig Economy

Kamal Islam

The role of technology in social and class struggles has long been debated among opponents of capitalism and the state.

But one of the newest branches of the Industrial Workers of the World, the Freelance Journalists' Union, or IWWFJU, shows that digital praxis, coupled with the radical labor organization's century-old model of organizing, offers even the most precarious workers new possibilities for resistance to their century-old enemy: the employing class.

Such was the case in June, when the IWW-FJU took to social media to reach freelancers for Vox media, the liberal conglomerate that includes their flagship site known for its narrative/ explainer-style coverage of socio-cultural subject matter, as well as digital verticals like Curbed (Real Estate), Eater (Food), SB Nation (Sports), and the Verge (Tech).

In May, Vox published Alexia Fernandez Campbell's article "The recession hasn't ended for gig economy workers." Its conclusions were self-evident for most of us, with the possible exception of the rich liberals who run digital media, and occupy most senior editorial positions. Trying to exist in the gig economy—whether you're a freelance journalist, a Seamless delivery person, or an Uber driver—is a constant struggle for material security and financial independence, in stark contrast to the myth of the self-reliant independent contractor. Quite often, in fact, they are trapped by the conditions of their employment.

At the time of the article's publication, freelance contributors to Vox and its affiliates were prohibited from publicly sharing their rates by their contract provisions, a clause designed to allow commissioning editors to offer writers and photographers the absolute least they could.

The FJU issued a call for Vox freelancers to anonymously submit their rates, and received 48 responses in total. Some respondents were being paid as little as \$0.10 a word for feature length articles requiring heavy reporting. As Rolling Stone contributor Molly Crabapple notes on the FJU's website, these rates can often amount to as little as \$1 an hour.

On August 16, Vox announced that it eliminated the provisions of its freelance agreement that prohibited contractors from disclosing and discussing rates. It was a victory for Vox contributors, and the IWW-FJU. But the fundamental reality of life as a freelance journalist, and the contracts that govern them, remain the same for most writers.

Freelancers submit their pitches for articles "on spec," that is, at the whim of editors, who sometimes reject or ignore the submission only to steal it themselves. If a pitch is accepted, a writer then works for a flat rate agreed upon at the outset of their assignment, inclusive of multiple drafts, hours of reporting, interviewing, transcription, and editing.

Editors are then free to reject a final draft as they see fit. Most outlets only accept invoices for payment once an article is published, and terms allow for payment months after an invoice is submitted. Even then, some outlets simply won't pay unless threatened with legal action.

This is the distinctly un-sexy reality of life as a journalist, the supposed guardians of truth in capitalist society.

A decade ago, the revolutionary potential of mass movements linked with technology was heralded by many as a threat to authoritarian rule and even to capitalism itself.

Social media was the new printing press, and the Protestant Reformation had a modern analogue in the Arab Spring, the European anti-austerity movement, and Occupy.

Today, it feels as though we are living in the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and that the wave of authoritarian populists sweeping the globe have harnessed the power of technology to secure power, and even commit unspeakable acts of violence against the powerless.

In its earliest days, the IWW stood out within the Labor movement for its advocacy of industrial sabotage, a tactic embraced by various movements throughout the 20th century, from the Italian Autonomists of the 1970s, to the Greek anarchists of the modern era.

The IWW-FJU is fighting for the ability of people to tell the truth in our society, using its principles of horizontal organizing and direct action, along with 21st century tactics. Eventually, however, all such organizing will face the fundamental choice of whether to struggle for or against work itself, and the question of what post-work journalism might look like.

More info on the FJU is at **freelancejournalistsunion.org**. Email contact: freelancejournalists@iww.org
Kamal Islam is a freelance journalist from Michigan.



Kamal Islam
IWW Takes on the Freelance Journalist Gig Economy

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/405-winter-2020/iww-takes-on-the-freelance-journalist-gig-economy>
Fifth Estate #405, Winter, 2020

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net