



DISABLING WORK: NEOLIBERAL LABOR, DIGITAL GOVERNANCE, AND THE MAKING OF STRUCTURAL IMPAIRMENT IN INDONESIA'S SERVICE INDUSTRIES

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Abstract

Occupational disability is often defined in terms of physical impairment or social exclusion. However, in neoliberal service economies like Indonesia, disablement increasingly emerges from everyday labor conditions. This study explores how digital governance, algorithmic control, and performance pressure contribute to structural disablement among service workers. Based on qualitative fieldwork from January to March 2025 in Jakarta, West Java, and Banten, we conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation across transportation, graphic design, civil service, and education sectors. Using a grounded political economy approach and Engels' concept of social murder, we argue that disablement is produced within the labor process itself. Workers reported chronic pain, anxiety, insomnia, and emotional exhaustion linked to blurred work-life boundaries and digital surveillance. Despite these harms, managerial narratives normalize suffering under the guise of productivity and resilience. Occupational health programs fail to recognize cumulative, non-visible harm, especially in the Global South. Many workers did not identify as disabled despite ongoing impairment. We reconceptualize disability as a structural outcome of labor regimes, urging systemic reform beyond individualized care.

Keywords: Occupational Health, Digital Governance, Indonesia.

Abstrak

Disabilitas kerja sering dipahami sebagai keterbatasan fisik atau bentuk eksklusi sosial. Namun, dalam ekonomi jasa neoliberal seperti Indonesia, disabilitas semakin sering muncul dari kondisi kerja sehari-hari. Studi ini menyoroti bagaimana tata kelola digital, kontrol algoritmik, dan tekanan kinerja berkontribusi pada pembentukan disabilitas struktural di kalangan pekerja sektor jasa. Berdasarkan kerja lapangan kualitatif dari Januari hingga Maret 2025 di Jakarta, Jawa Barat, dan Banten, kami melakukan wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipatif pada sektor transportasi, desain grafis, aparatur sipil negara, dan pendidikan. Menggunakan pendekatan ekonomi politik terapan dan konsep "pembunuhan sosial" dari Engels, kami berargumen bahwa disabilitas diproduksi dalam proses kerja itu sendiri. Para pekerja melaporkan nyeri kronis, kecemasan, insomnia, dan kelelahan emosional akibat kaburnya batas kerja–hidup dan pengawasan digital. Meskipun mengalami dampak ini, narasi manajerial menormalkan penderitaan atas nama produktivitas dan resiliensi. Program kesehatan kerja gagal mengenali dampak kumulatif dan tak kasatmata, terutama di Global South. Banyak pekerja tidak mengidentifikasi diri sebagai penyandang disabilitas meski mengalami gangguan berkelanjutan. Studi ini mereposisi disabilitas sebagai produk struktural rezim kerja, bukan sekadar kondisi individu.

Kata Kunci: Kesehatan Kerja, Tata Kelola Digital, Indonesia.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Occupational diseases in Indonesia—both physical and mental—have sharply increased, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Ministry of Manpower, 1,123 physical illness cases were reported in 2021, compared to only 71 in 2020. Although the number slightly decreased in 2022, the upward trend continued through 2025. Mental health disorders remain a major concern. Gallup's (2024) *State of the Global Workplace* reports that 16% of Indonesian workers experience work-related stress and 27% suffer from depression. These conditions are especially acute among Generation Z workers, who are more vulnerable to digital stress and burnout.

Although the government has launched occupational health and counseling programs, their implementation remains inadequate. Current frameworks fail to recognize how work systems themselves produce harm, particularly in service economies where job insecurity, algorithmic control, and performance demands have intensified.

Disability studies have largely focused on inclusion and access to employment or public services. However, they often neglect how capitalist production itself generates disablement. Emerging scholarship—such as Holdren's (2020) work on U.S. industrial accidents, Bellofiore's (2004) study of mental crises in Europe, and Santiago's (2012) analysis of oil workers in Mexico—suggests that impairments often emerge within exploitative labor environments.

This article builds on these insights using Engels' (1969) concept of “social murder” to examine disablement as structurally produced within labor processes. Drawing on fieldwork in Indonesia's expanding service sector, the study reframes disability not as a condition of exclusion but as a systemic outcome of neoliberal labor regimes. In doing so, it highlights how capitalist accumulation thrives on the physical and mental deterioration of workers, rendering disability a foundational but invisible byproduct of modern work.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This article is based on a field study conducted across various service industry sectors in Jakarta, Depok, and South Tangerang, including transportation, graphic design, government administration, and education. These three cities were selected due to their status as major hubs of the service industry in Indonesia. In 2024, the service sector accounted for a significant portion of the Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) in Jakarta (37.8%) (BPS DKI Jakarta, 2025), South Tangerang (37.9%) (BPS Tangerang Selatan, 2025), and Depok

(21.8%) (BPS Depok, 2025). In Jakarta, service sector workers made up 83% of the total employed population in dominant industries (BPS DKI Jakarta, 2024). In South Tangerang, service workers comprised 62% of the workforce (BPS Tangerang Selatan, 2021), while in Depok the figure reached 82% (BPS Depok, 2025b).

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach to uncover the subjective meanings and lived experiences of service sector workers in relation to labor processes and systems (Creswell, 2013). In doing so, it draws on Friedrich Engels' (1969) concept of "social murder," developed through his ethnographic investigation of working-class conditions in 19th-century England's manufacturing centers. Engels' study represents a foundational but underutilized political economy perspective that significantly informed Karl Marx's later theorization of labor and capitalism. By positioning labor processes and systems as the analytical premise, this article situates service workers' experiences as integral to the structural evolution of workplace environments that produce disablement.

The article relies on a combination of in-depth interviews, observation, and literature review to support its empirical analysis. The literature review provides a development of disability studies and a broader context on the prevalence of physical and mental health issues within service sector labor systems—an area often overlooked in both mainstream and critical disability studies. Meanwhile, interviews and observations capture workers' health conditions, labor-related problems, and their relationship to the structural development of service work.

All data were collected over a two-month period, from January to March 2025. Initially, the data focused on developments in disability studies and the physical and mental health challenges faced by workers within their workplace environments. From there, the inquiry expanded to examine the growth of Indonesia's service industry and the experiential realities of its labor force. It is important to note that data collection did not follow a chronological order but rather an iterative process, whereby collection, analysis, and interpretation occurred simultaneously (Creswell, 2013). The data were then analyzed in three stages: transcription into written form, coding into thematic categories, and presentation in the discussion section.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

The Development of Disability Studies: Capitalism as Analytical Premise?

Disability studies have historically relied on two dominant frameworks: the medical model, which views disability as a physiological or genetic deviation requiring treatment (Forstner, 2022), and the social model, which frames disability as exclusion generated by inaccessible infrastructures and discriminatory norms. The social model shifted attention from individual bodies to societal barriers, yet scholars critique its inability to address how capitalism structures and reproduces disability (Brocco, 2024; Roy, 2024).

In recent years, critical disability scholars have moved toward a political economy approach, identifying capitalism as central to the production of disablement. They argue that economic systems do not merely exclude disabled people but actively generate impairment through exploitative labor structures and institutional neglect (Chis, 2023; Colin Barnes, 2018). This perspective recasts disability not as a static identity but as a condition created within unjust social and economic arrangements.

Research shows how neoliberal regimes, with their emphasis on market efficiency, exacerbate exclusion through austerity measures, healthcare cuts, and precarious employment (Fritsch, 2015; Jeon, 2015; Biyanwila & Soldatic, 2016). In the Global South, these dynamics are intensified by weak social protections, restricting disabled individuals' access to welfare and health services (Grover & Soldatic, 2013). As a result, many are pushed into informal labor, eroding their economic autonomy and reinforcing cycles of dependency and marginalization.

Employment remains a key focus. The dominance of the medical model often renders disabled individuals "unfit to work," legitimizing wage suppression and lack of workplace accommodations (Williams, 2024; Mladenov, 2015). Scholars highlight how this dichotomy between "productive" and "non-productive" citizens distorts understandings of labor, obscuring how work environments themselves produce impairment (Chis, 2023).

Recent studies, including those by Ruppel (2023), explore how poor workplace conditions, especially in low-wage service jobs, lead to chronic pain, anxiety, and burnout. These harms are intensified in digitally mediated labor systems, where algorithmic control and 24/7 availability become normalized. For instance, "work from home" setups increase digital stress (Azzahra et al., 2022), and "technostress" becomes pervasive with constant platform updates and surveillance (Noel, 2022).

In countries like Indonesia, platform capitalism has transformed the service sector—education, design, transportation—via app-based work with unstable incomes, weak protections, and heightened surveillance (Mahy, 2020; Nurhadi, 2023; Putri et al., 2023; Sudiarawan et al., 2024). These digital labor regimes erode work-life boundaries, creating continuous stress, emotional fatigue, and a distorted sense of time. Workers report being unable to distinguish work from rest as flexible working hours extend endlessly (Karaboğa & Şehitoğlu, 2024; Westover, 2024; Xu, 2023).

While calls have emerged for responsible AI and improved infrastructure (Verma et al., 2023), many remain technocratic, focusing on individual adaptation rather than addressing systemic harm. Others suggest broader transformations in labor systems, emphasizing accessibility, collective care, and economic justice (Buetten, 2018; Chis, 2024).

In sum, capitalist labor systems not only exclude but actively generate disability, particularly in service economies shaped by digitalization. The disabling nature of work remains underexplored in both policy and scholarship. Bridging labor studies and disability theory is crucial to exposing how contemporary work environments act as mechanisms of structural impairment, especially in precarious contexts of the Global South.

The Making of Disability in Neoliberal Times

Indonesian Law No. 8/2016 defines persons with disabilities as individuals who experience long-term physical, intellectual, mental, or sensory limitations which, in interaction with the environment, restrict their full participation on the basis of equal rights. Equal rights are further interpreted as opportunities or access to actualize one's potential in state and societal functions. If workers suffer from mental and physical disorders due to their job environments, they fall within this legal definition of disability. However, empirical studies on stress-related work reveal that the very conditions and environments of work often hinder rather than enable participation, contradicting the essence of equal rights.

Although stress-related work has been studied extensively, these investigations have largely remained disconnected from disability studies. By employing the concept of "social murder," this section argues that the structure of capitalist labor conditions is a key factor in the production of disability. This idea is explored further through historical, legal, and political-economic analyses, and later illustrated through workers' experiences in Indonesia's service sector.

The notion of social murder—where systemic conditions cause premature death or disablement—can be traced back to the structuring of Indonesia's labor system under capitalism. In 1965, a major political upheaval replaced the influence of labor unions and peasant organizations with a military-capitalist regime (Hadiz & Robison, 2013). The New Order suppressed the 1960 Agrarian Law and development plans under Sukarno, which had once empowered peasants and workers. Hilmar Farid (2005) terms this ongoing violence "primitive accumulation," referring to the forced separation of laborers from the means of production to facilitate capitalist expansion.

This historical rupture laid the groundwork for a labor regime favoring capital. Labor unions lost bargaining power and political voice, particularly under the "exclusionary corporatism" of the New Order (Hadiz, 1997), where labor disputes were resolved repressively, and workers were excluded from decisions. Even after the fall of the New Order, the labor system has remained largely unchanged. While some reforms emerged due to late-1990s labor movements—such as increases in minimum wage and health insurance—these gains were eventually co-opted and neutralized by state-capital alliances (Hadiz & Robison, 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and deepened these pre-existing structural vulnerabilities. The Job Creation Law (Omnibus Law) significantly curtailed labor protections: allowing dismissals without court involvement, reducing severance pay, weakening social security, and enabling indefinite outsourcing contracts (Suryanto & Santoso, 2024). Research by Yudhi & Yuniati (2022) in Bandar Lampung found that wage cuts during the pandemic worsened workers' quality of life and mental health. Similar findings were reported in the restaurant and MSME sectors of Bandung (Erislan & Sambas, 2023).

Local regulations (Perda) mandating wage increases, such as Pasuruan's Perda No. 22/2012, were overridden by national law. Companies not only ignored wage raises but often reduced salaries (Safana & Abadi, 2024). This legal ambiguity left workers in a state of anxiety and powerlessness. The tripartite system of wage dispute resolution, in place since the New Order, further exacerbated inequality by often favoring employers (Kristyanto et al., 2023). Even regulatory efforts like the Ministerial Circular No. M/3/HK.04/III/2020, ostensibly issued to protect workers, failed to provide real protections (Pastika, 2022).

The pandemic also deteriorated conditions related to employment contracts, work hours, and welfare. The Job Creation Law facilitated prolonged outsourcing and unilateral layoffs. Many workers received meager severance payments (Khairani & Arnetti, 2023). The reduction of work hours, while intended to curb viral spread, resulted in lower income and increased psychological pressure (Yudhi & Yuniati, 2022). Syuhada & Rahman (2022) found that vague circulars and lack of enforcement exposed workers to exploitation and burnout.

These hardships were compounded by insufficient social protections. Rafsanjani (2024) reported that the lack of social security endangers workers' health, particularly in informal and peri-urban sectors (Mustamin et al., 2022; Wiryawan et al., 2024). Workers in service sectors—where physical and mental health supports are minimal—are most vulnerable.

Critically, the pandemic is not merely a "natural disaster" but can be seen as a socio-ecological crisis embedded in the capitalist system. Jason W. Moore (2003) argues that capitalism emerged in response to socio-ecological crises such as the Black Death, which devastated Europe's population. The transition from feudalism to capitalism was driven by environmental degradation and the commodification of land and labor.

Moore (2015) further claims that capitalism generates "negative value," where centuries of surplus accumulation culminate in environmental catastrophe. COVID-19 is a product of this dynamic. Rob Wallace (in Wallace & Pabst, 2020) links the pandemic to agrarian capitalism's encroachment on primary forests. Ecosystem destruction allows pathogens to mutate and reach human populations through food systems. Thus, capitalism itself created the ecological conditions for COVID-19.

The rise of zoonotic diseases—Ebola, HIV, SARS-CoV-2—is a result of capitalist ecological policies (Coplin, 2023). David Whyte (2022) calls this "pathology of accumulation," whereby capitalism commodifies nature and inflicts harm on human bodies through emergent viruses.

The global capitalist division of labor, dominated by multinational corporations, intensifies vulnerability in the Global South. Indonesia, positioned as a supplier of cheap labor and raw materials, became a hotspot for virus transmission (Foster & Suwandi, 2020). Racial capitalism provides a useful lens to understand this inequality. Workers in the Global South are placed in the most hazardous conditions with poor access to healthcare, making virus spread more rapid than in wealthier nations (Papamichail, 2023; Prasad, 2024).

From a social murder perspective, COVID-19 exemplifies how capitalism degrades physical and mental health. The virus is a byproduct of policies prioritizing capital over ecological and human well-being. Exploitation of labor and nature, suppression of worker movements, and relentless surplus extraction have produced widespread suffering. The working class is slowly being destroyed—not only by the virus, but also by the systemic policies that enable it.

From Worker to Wreckage: Disabling Labor Practices in Indonesia's Service Sector

The lived experiences of workers in Indonesia's service industry reveal the intensifying exploitation that escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emergency policies and the shift to digital work environments deepened psychosocial pressures. A BBC report (Johanson, 2021) highlighted that many service workers experienced severe mental exhaustion, leading to physical health deterioration. This condition was triggered by wage cuts, intensified workloads, and demanding customer behavior. In many cases, workers resigned due to trauma. Alarmingly, employers often misinterpreted these breakdowns as personal failure.

In Jakarta, a graphic designer named I faced extreme exhaustion. Assigned to produce three to four product advertisements weekly, he was expected to be on standby nearly 24/7. "I can't even hang out. My phone keeps ringing. It feels like I work 23.5 hours a day," he said. With no space for mental recuperation, I turned to methamphetamines to cope. "Working in Jakarta is crazy. I didn't use meth for fun. I needed it to function."

Over three years, I spent most of his income on alcohol and drugs—alcohol to relieve stress, meth to survive deadlines. The pandemic only worsened conditions. "Working from home felt like hell. I was chained to my phone and laptop. Now, I sometimes lie and say my devices are broken just to get some rest." His story reveals how capitalist systems produce mental distress and normalize unhealthy coping mechanisms among precarious creative workers.

Similar pressures were faced by J, an advocacy officer at a human rights NGO. He was responsible for producing campaign materials, press releases, and organizing biannual workshops. Although his workload was lighter than I's, he remained digitally tethered. "The phone can't be turned off. If I ignore the WhatsApp group for a moment, there are hundreds of unread messages." J carried his laptop and charger at all times, even during social outings. Pandemic-induced remote work intensified this anxiety, disturbing his sleep.

J's contract insecurity added further strain. With a wife and toddler to support, his income matched Jakarta's minimum wage—barely enough to save. "For the next six months, thank God, I'm safe. After that, who knows? NGO contracts are never guaranteed.

His mental distress was compounded by unsympathetic superiors. When coordination faltered, J was labeled a poor performer, even if the cause was rest or travel. He began suffering from acid reflux and relied on medication. "I go to the doctor a lot. Stress ruins my appetite. I eat whatever I can find, even if it's unhealthy. Clean food isn't always available in the field."

Two civil servants—AH and P—shared similar stories. AH, a technician at a communications office in South Tangerang, managed digital infrastructure across city departments, hospitals, and schools. Though officially working from 7:30 AM to 4:00 PM, he often stayed late. "Coming home at 8 PM is normal. Once, I finished at 11 PM. On the eve of Eid, I was told to install CCTV at an official's house. No compensation."

AH received emergency requests at night and frequently had to fix servers past midnight. These demands extended his workday indefinitely. He also performed administrative tasks unrelated to his role. P, a cybersecurity officer in Depok, faced similar conditions. He was tasked with building digital security systems and mitigating monthly cyberattacks. Like AH, P endured spontaneous reporting demands and had to remain constantly alert. "It's chaos during an attack. But even sudden data requests are stressful. Sometimes I have to open my laptop while watching my kid."

P's agency required night shifts, without extra pay. Many civil servants like him never expected such working conditions. Outdated infrastructure and digitally illiterate superiors worsened their burdens. Tasks that should be managed by management often fell to overworked junior staff.

AL, a lecturer and civil servant in Jakarta, faced the triple burden of teaching, research, and community service. Yet institutional culture demanded more. She handled accreditation reports, media tasks, and daily Zoom meetings. "There's always a surprise. If you miss one meeting, you're out of the loop. Everything is mandatory."

Constant policy changes introduced new workflows and apps. Administrative tasks consumed AL's time and mental energy. She was active in multiple WhatsApp groups for coordination. "Each group generates hundreds of messages a day. You're expected to stay connected around the clock." Her colleagues frequently experienced burnout and mental

distress. Some required counseling from the university's crisis center. "It's no secret that many lecturers suffer from fatigue. Even though there's an 'integrity zone' here, mental and physical health is not a priority."

Like others, AL became physically unwell. "Being a lecturer ages you early," she said. Recognition was minimal, while demands continued growing. The work-life boundary disappeared completely. Even with relatively stable income and job security, civil servants like AL, AH, and P struggled to maintain their well-being.

The most precarious stories came from D and B, food and goods couriers. Equipped only with a motorbike and smartphone, they spent over 12 hours daily on the road. Since COVID-19, their companies had removed the star-rating incentive system. Without performance bonuses, D and B had to accept every order—regardless of distance, weight, or payment.

"We often get food orders that are far and burn a lot of gas," B said. Parking fees, which were supposed to be reimbursed, often weren't. "If we park outside, the risk of theft increases."

Company deductions reached 30% or more. Customers often manipulated app settings to reduce fees—claiming delivery points closer than they really were. D reported: "Pet food orders often say 1 kg, but they turn out to be 5 kg. That damages the bike."

D's motorbike had broken down repeatedly. He had to replace major components, including a full engine overhaul. A mechanic once advised him to buy a new bike. B, who once delivered a double-door refrigerator, echoed this. "It felt like I was carrying an ondel-ondel (giant puppet). One wrong move, and it's crushed." Overloading shortened vehicle lifespans, while earnings remained unstable.

Unlike other workers, D and B had no employee status. They were labeled "partners," a euphemism for the denial of labor rights. When problems arose, customer service often blamed drivers. "Talking to the service center is like talking to a wall," B said. "The driver is always wrong."

They suffered chronic stress, uncertain income, and no safety nets. Rejecting low-paying or heavy jobs could reduce their job allocations. Customer ratings dictated daily order volumes. "Customers aren't just kings—they're gods," D said. "They're always right."

These testimonies illustrate how labor conditions and environments generate both mental and physical illness—ultimately producing disability. Across public and private

sectors, long hours, intensified workloads, constant connectivity, blurred work-life boundaries, low pay, and minimal protections collectively inflict harm. Under neoliberal capitalism, especially in crisis contexts, systems of labor are structured to exploit, exhaust, and discard workers.

The narratives show how exploitation has been normalized as a condition of employment. As mental distress becomes chronic, and physical breakdowns accumulate, labor systems transition into machines for manufacturing disability. Without urgent intervention, more workers will be driven into states of permanent exhaustion—forming a disabled class embedded within capitalism’s engine of accumulation (Johanson, 2021; Nurhadi, 2023; Puspitarini et al., 2019).

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper examines how capitalism generates disabling work conditions, particularly in Indonesia’s service sector, where excessive workloads, invasive digitalization, and the erosion of boundaries between work and personal life lead to mental and physical deterioration. Drawing from the experiences of workers in advertising, NGOs, civil service, education, and courier services, the analysis challenges the conventional notion of disability as merely congenital or accidental. Instead, it redefines disability as a product of systemic exploitation that commodifies the body and mind. When assessed through the lens of Indonesia’s Law No. 8 of 2016 on disability rights, these labor-induced conditions reflect a form of structural disablement inflicted by the very nature of modern employment regimes.

This reality echoes Friedrich Engels’s concept of social murder, where the capitalist system slowly kills workers—body and soul—for the benefit of the ruling class. In Indonesia, this manifests through labor deregulation under the Job Creation Law and the intensification of precarity in the post-pandemic era. From service to industrial sectors, exploitative practices produce similar harms: chronic stress, occupational illness, and eroded health support systems. Workers become not just victims of harsh conditions but casualties of a systemic assault on laboring bodies. This paper therefore argues for a convergence of disability studies and labor studies, repositioning disability as a politically produced condition rooted in the violent logic of capitalist accumulation.

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