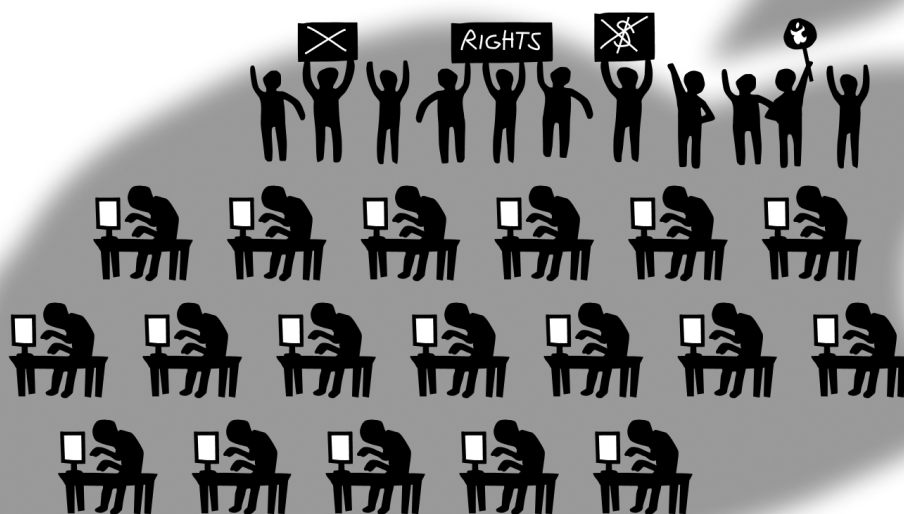


“This is Capitalism”: Apple’s Hidden Data Workers at the Shadows of the AI Boom



By Luciana



“This is Capitalism”: Apple’s Hidden Data Workers at the Shadows of the AI Boom
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Introduction

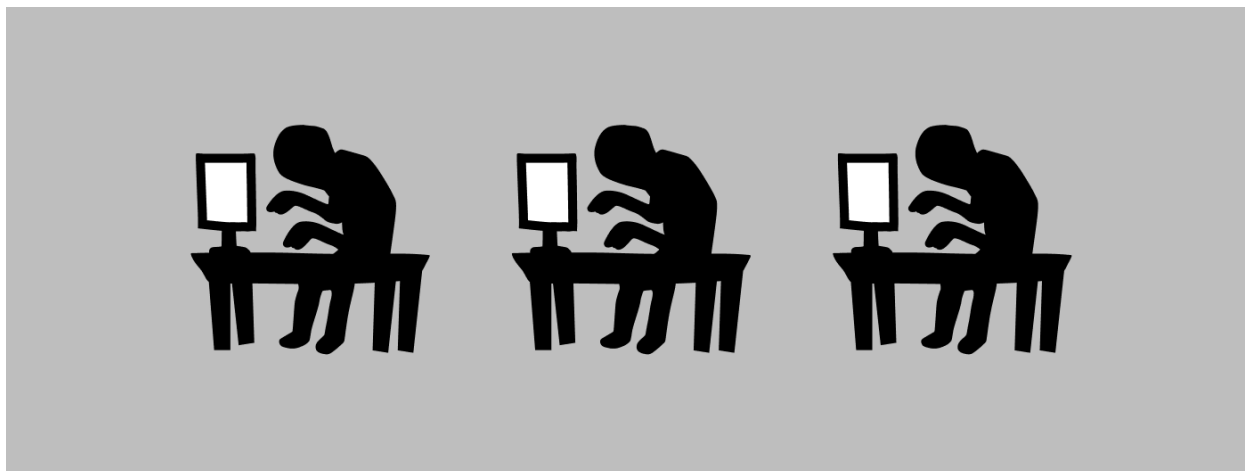
Outsourcing allows tech giants like Apple, Meta and TikTok to train their artificial intelligence systems (AI) at low cost and without loss of prestige. Both the AI companies and the business process outsourcing companies (BPOs) generate enormous profits by exploiting data workers. We are the ones who create and review the data used by the tech giants to train AI.

This text deals with the precarious circumstances under which we create the data for improving AI systems, as well as our resistance and demands for change. It is based on my own experiences and on personal interviews with five of my colleagues.

I faced a great challenge while writing this text: I had to balance two principles and goals. On one hand, I wanted to report authentically and personally, highlight grievances, and attribute them to the specific actors. On the other hand, I fear making myself or my colleagues vulnerable or jeopardizing our jobs. The reality that, in the worst case scenario, Apple could end its collaboration with my company weighed heavily on me. For this reason, I am writing anonymously and the interview participants are not named directly. My aim is to portray the personal experiences of my colleagues and myself vividly, without worsening their situation.



What Data Workers Do



Our daily work tasks as data workers consist of evaluating and processing data. We are presented with texts, images or videos and must categorize or improve them according to specified guidelines. These annotated and revised datasets are then presumably used to optimize artificial intelligence systems or search engines. As users, we are amazed at the data that AI systems spit out in seconds. But without the work of millions of data workers, these systems would not function.

In concrete and unspectacular terms: texts are created or annotated; images or videos are labeled or verified; websites are checked. It is a job that takes place in the open-plan office of a large international company. The orders are placed by tech giants as part of outsourcing, in our case by Apple.

Data workers are very often highly educated. Many of my colleagues have a high level of general education and sometimes several university degrees. Among them are interpreters, philologists, sociologists, psychologists and artists. Good English skills are a basic requirement for the job and you have to pass several tests to be hired. Most are in English, and only one tests the skills of the target language for which you will actually be working. Daily work instructions and guidelines are always in English, but the data we work with is in different languages. We all speak several foreign languages, some at native speaker level. Some attended multilingual schools and universities or grew up at least bilingual due to their family roots.

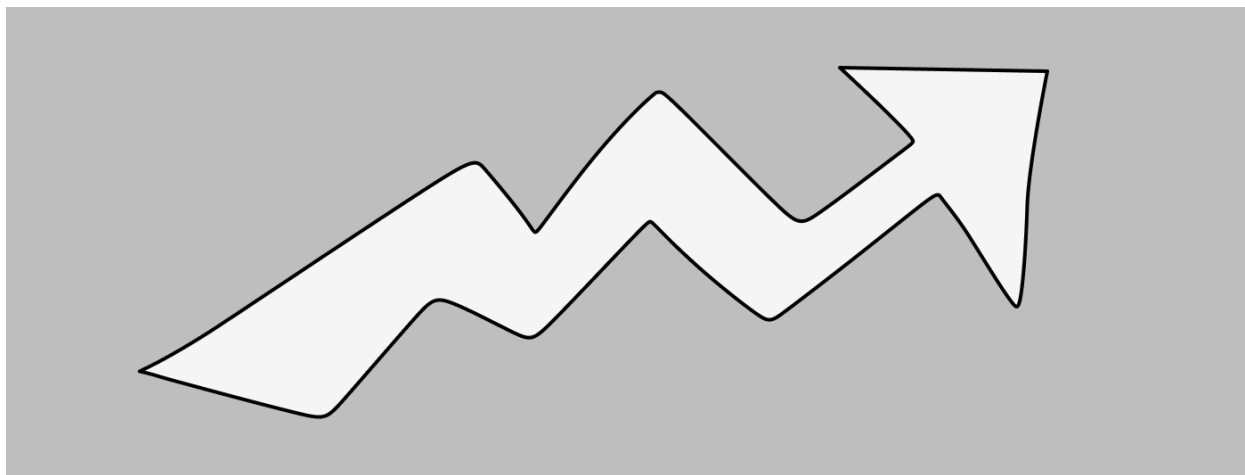
A few years ago, our work was still euphemistically referred to as “Data Analyst” on job portals. That seemed like an interesting activity that combines language skills and analytical abilities and opens up the possibility of finding a place in the rapidly changing job market. At the time, I also found the job description very exciting and had hoped to learn more about the processes and possibilities of computational linguistics and AI.

The daily tasks, however, are rather boring and repetitive. All kinds of often quite absurd data have to be checked, corrected or sorted out. This includes texts, images and videos. In some projects, we check the answers of AI systems or search engines to user prompts. Sometimes we have to check facts (e.g., name and author of a work of art) or correct fantasy texts, but often our tasks are more reminiscent of “Spot the difference” games. We assume that this data is ultimately used to improve AI systems or search engines, however how exactly this happens is a process from which data workers are completely excluded. We work through our daily quota; as soon as a “task” is completed, it disappears from our screen.



Structural Problems of the Industry

Performance Pressure and Control



Our work is carried out according to strict productivity specifications, constantly measured, and subject to ever-changing guidelines and work instructions. The quantitative and qualitative productivity targets are set high and occasionally mathematically impossible to achieve. Some of these targets are an obstacle to genuine productivity and the guidelines for data interpretation are often unclear or subjective.

For example, the time that workers actively spend logged into the work application is constantly measured. Active time is registered when workers move the mouse and click, which means we must constantly jump back to the application window, even during necessary internet research or communication with managers. For the client, this is a control mechanism. The fact that this does not exactly contribute to a thorough and fast text or video analysis is quite obvious. I now know various tricks to achieve the expected time in the application and many managers know that we cannot meet the targets without cheating. But it is obviously preferable to them that we use tricks than to tell the client that the targets are unrealistic.

Most of the time, our work feels rather meaningless and useless, primarily because we receive no information about whether and how exactly the data we review is even used. The absurd criteria by which we are evaluated naturally worsens this feeling. In some projects, our data is ostensibly corrected, however we have hardly any

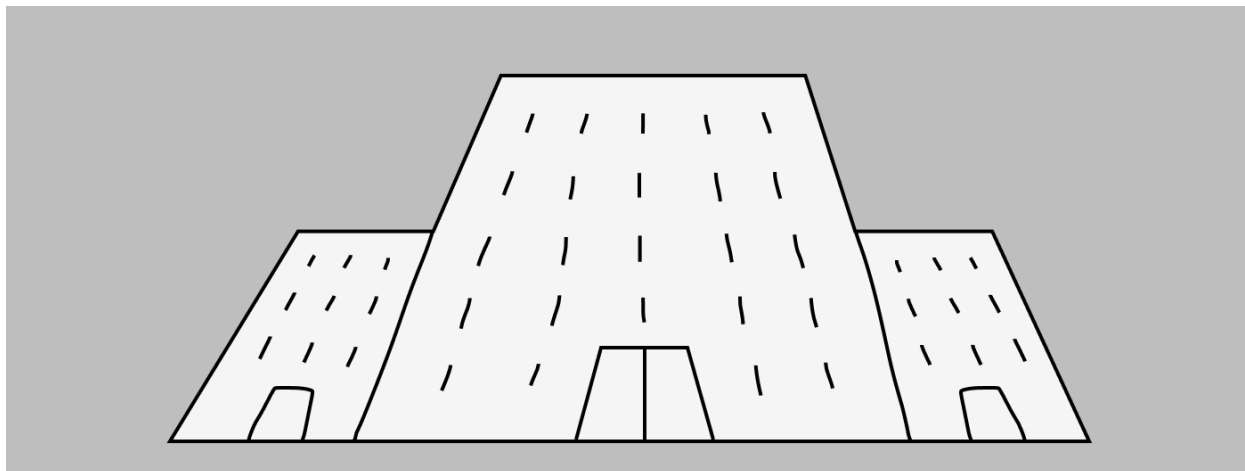
information about the criteria used for this. We have no direct contact with the correctors and are only presented with the results. We are told what percentage of the corrected tasks we completed correctly, but not the specific mistakes we made or what the correct solutions would have been. It often seems that the correctors do not understand the tasks any better than we do. Our suspicion is that the corrections are mostly carried out by other data workers, working somewhere else in the world for a different company, doing the same job as us.

Data workers are under constant pressure. Employees are criticized for the flimsiest reasons, given "warnings" that sometimes are nothing short of verbal attacks and threats from superiors, and layoffs are frequent. I have witnessed long-standing employees dismissed without notice, and accused of deliberately worsening their performance, despite their impeccable work ethic. Often the company's arguments are unfounded, but of course, it is extremely nerve-wracking for those impacted to fight against them.

Of course, you have to work during your working hours. Apple's targets, however, sometimes make it impossible to adhere to the already insufficient statutory breaks. Sometimes we just click on anything wildly to meet our quota.

In the long term, it feels frustrating and alienating to work like this. Data workers work alone, their targets are always evaluated individually and teamwork is neither encouraged nor valued, rather it is viewed with suspicion by higher management. Nevertheless, we are not allowed to work from home and must spend our hours in the open-plan office every day.

Outsourcing: The Almighty Client



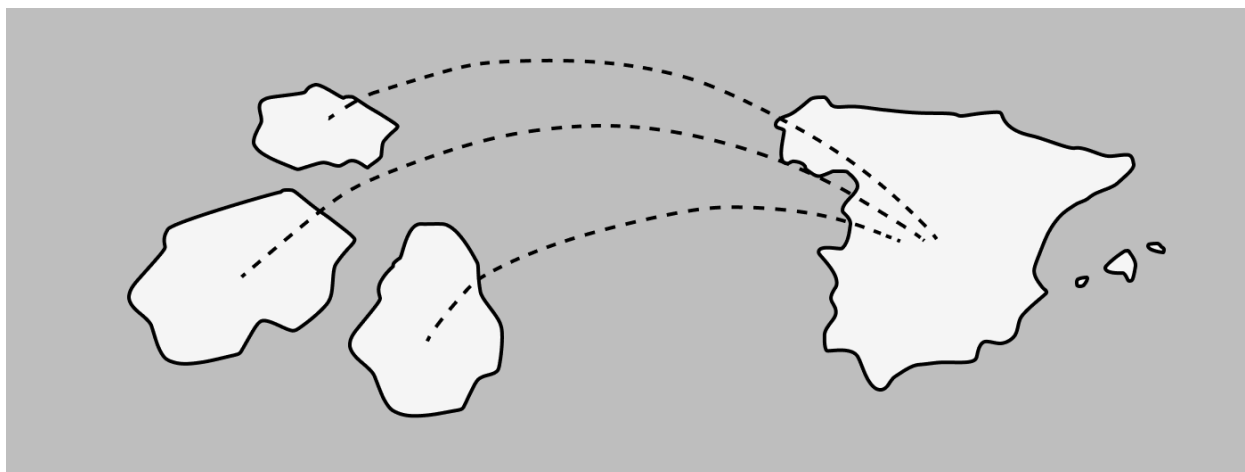
Since we are not directly employed by Apple, our company can always hide behind the customer's demands when the aforementioned targets are increased abruptly and without consultation. We are supposed to deliver more and better performances, otherwise the customer could award its contracts to a competing company.

This is not just a convenient excuse for our employer to demand more from us and create acceptance for deteriorating working conditions. It is also a very real practice. Several times a year, the so-called "headcount" takes place at companies that do outsourcing for Apple. At this moment, Apple tells the companies how many workers it currently needs for the respective language region. All employees considered "redundant" are laid off at short notice, often within a few days. Loopholes in Spanish legislation and labor protections make it possible for large companies to act in this way.

In fact, there is an incentive for clients to play different outsourcing companies off against each other, creating competitive pressure to keep prices low. This pressure is naturally passed on to the workers and compounded by the fact that data work tasks like the ones we receive are also awarded to freelancers on international platforms. Outsourced data workers are part of a competition between BPOs, but also pitted against platform workers under bogus self-employment contracts who are not even paid at the minimum wage. Since these are international platforms, it is particularly difficult to prove such abuses and put a stop to them. The outsourcing companies themselves have branches in different countries and continents, some also operate their own platforms for freelance orders. Customers therefore have the opportunity to push prices for their orders down further and further, and the contracted companies try to outdo each other in terms of price-performance ratio. All of this happens at the expense of data workers around the globe.



Exploitation of Migrants

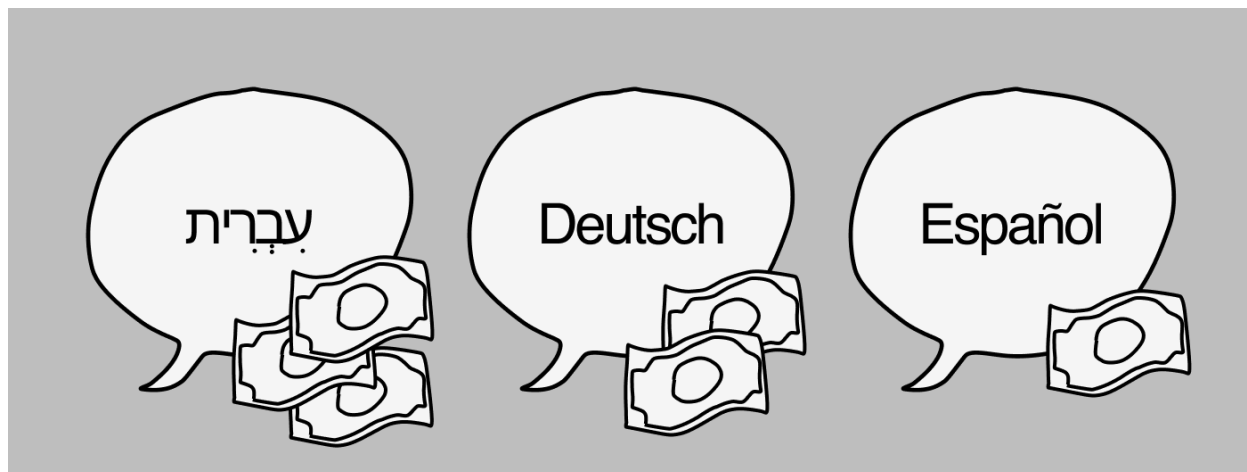


Many of my co-workers are foreigners and our company, like many others, skillfully exploits its location advantage. On the one hand, they use the location as a selling point, since many foreigners think it's great to live in Spain for a while. One of the interviewees noted that "the company sells the sun in Spain as if it made it shine itself every day." On the other hand, many employees have left their home countries for economic or political reasons, and their residence permit depends on a valid employment contract.

Foreign employees are easily kept in line because they do not understand the local language sufficiently, know little about their rights or are simply glad to have found work at all. Many do not have the knowledge or the mental capacity to get bogged down in lengthy legal proceedings, even when they realize how unfairly they are being treated. This, combined with the uncertain legal situation in Spain, makes it easy for our company to exploit us.

In response to written complaints, employees often receive the laconic reply: "The company always acts in accordance with current legislation." Several court rulings have already proven the opposite, however it seems to be cheaper for the companies to contest or delay every legal proceeding than to follow court rulings. The long waiting times in the Spanish judicial system, sometimes lasting years, play into the hands of the large companies and make it difficult to achieve real successes for workers' protection.

Discrimination by Language Regions



There are enormous differences in pay and treatment of employees by outsourcing companies, depending on the language region for which the person works. As mentioned, while English is the company language and remains essential, each of us work in different language regions. Someone who checks texts or images for the Swedish market can earn several hundred Euros more per month than someone who does the same work in the same project for the Russian-speaking market.

The best paid are those who work for the Hebrew-speaking market, followed by Nordic languages (Swedish, Finnish, etc.). Central European languages (German, French) form the next salary bracket and the lowest salaries are paid to those working in languages associated with Eastern Europe, southern Europe and the Global South (Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and Russian).

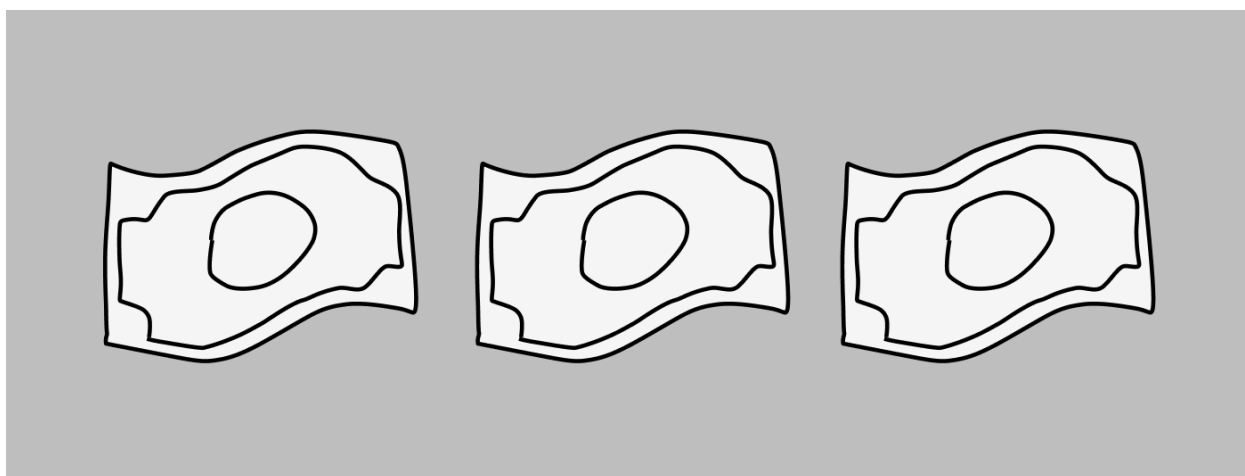
Importantly, this is the same work, in the same city, for the same employer, on the same project. The principle of equal treatment of employees has been systematically violated by the outsourcing companies for decades. Several court rulings have been made ordering companies to apply the principle of equal treatment. Unfortunately, it seems cheaper for them to contest such rulings in court or delay their implementation.

Global inequality is manifested in pay grades. The foundations for racism, classism, and anti-Semitism are created and solidified. This is often justified by claims that it is not possible to find Israelis or Northern Europeans who would work for such a low wage at all. This argument is accepted by some employees, more commonly by those who benefit from higher wages, but also by workers belonging to a less well-paid

language group. The latter often resign themselves because they are glad to have any job at all or because they think it's pointless to protest. But there are always data workers who rebel against this injustice.

Our work is not paid according to performance, but according to personal origin, even though we all live in the same country and the cost of living is the same for everyone. I find it remarkable that sometimes it is those belonging to the better-paid language groups who speak out clearly against this injustice. Not everyone wants to profit from the privilege of coming from a richer country and ignore the injustice done to their peers.

"To Them, We're Just Numbers": Real Wage Loss and Rising Cost of Living



The wages in our industry have been frozen for several years. They are not adjusted to the constantly rising cost of living in Spanish big cities, which means a very real loss of quality of life for the workers. In fact, the starting salary is currently lower than it was a few years ago.

The official annual inflation rate for a representative basket of consumer goods and services is moderate (just under 3%), but data published by the Spanish Central Bank (Banco de España) shows a 40% increase in food prices between 2021 and 2024 ¹. Our wages are not adjusted at all and have therefore lost purchasing power. This is

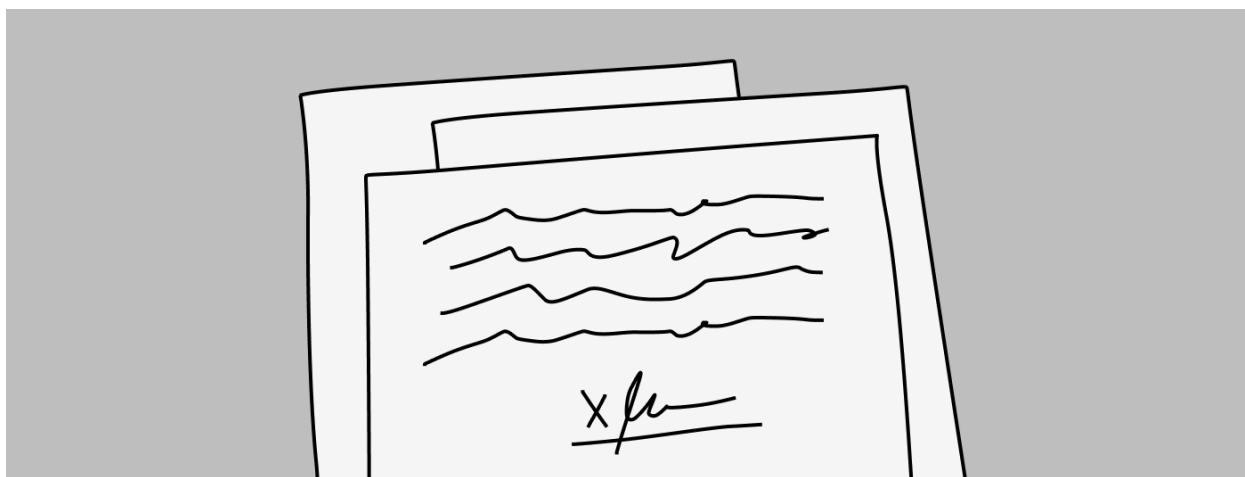
¹ Food prices: developments and outlook. Economic Bulletin / Banco de España, 2025/Q2, 05.
<https://doi.org/10.53479/39667>

particularly painful for us in the lower pay grades, as food is already a relatively large part of our monthly expenses. This is also tragic considering that rents and mortgage costs in Spanish big cities rise rapidly every year, by more than 10%^{2 3}. Our quality of life and financial means decrease year by year, meanwhile, our company celebrates its successes at lavish parties, and the CEOs of the outsourcing companies post on LinkedIn about how splendidly everything is going.

All local employees are invited to the annual parties, and members of top management are flown in from abroad. Many of us feel mocked by this and are not willing to act as extras for the price of a few drinks and some food. We can gladly do without a celebration of an economic success that otherwise doesn't benefit us, even though some of us are happy to at least fill our bellies at the company's expense.

As a data worker, you don't feel valued as a worker or as a human being, but are reduced to a mere number and a means of production.

Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs)



The feeling of helplessness and oppression is reinforced by the so-called NDAs (non-disclosure agreements) that we must sign before we are even hired. They are intended to prevent data workers from speaking openly about their work. Salary,

² Instituto Nacional de Estadística: Flash estimate of the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

<https://www.ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/en/notasPrensa.htm?anyo=2025&cid=1254736176802>

³ Spain's housing market enters a new expansionary phase. Caixa Bank Research. Judit Montoriol Garriga, Pedro Álvarez Ondina. October 2nd, 2025.

<https://www.caixabankresearch.com/en/sectoral-analysis/real-estate/spains-housing-market-enters-new-expansionary-phase#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20main%20national,the%20case%20of%20new%20homes.>

customer, activity and working conditions fall under this agreement, which remains in force even after the employment relationship ends. Violation of these terms may lead to economic and criminal consequences.

I reiterate that the work itself is highly unspectacular and secretive – we know almost nothing about the actual use of the reviewed data. Fear of industrial espionage cannot, therefore, be the reason for the strict NDAs. It is more likely about protecting Apple and other big tech companies from the reputational damage that would result from the public knowing about the working conditions, guidelines and criteria data workers are subjected to.

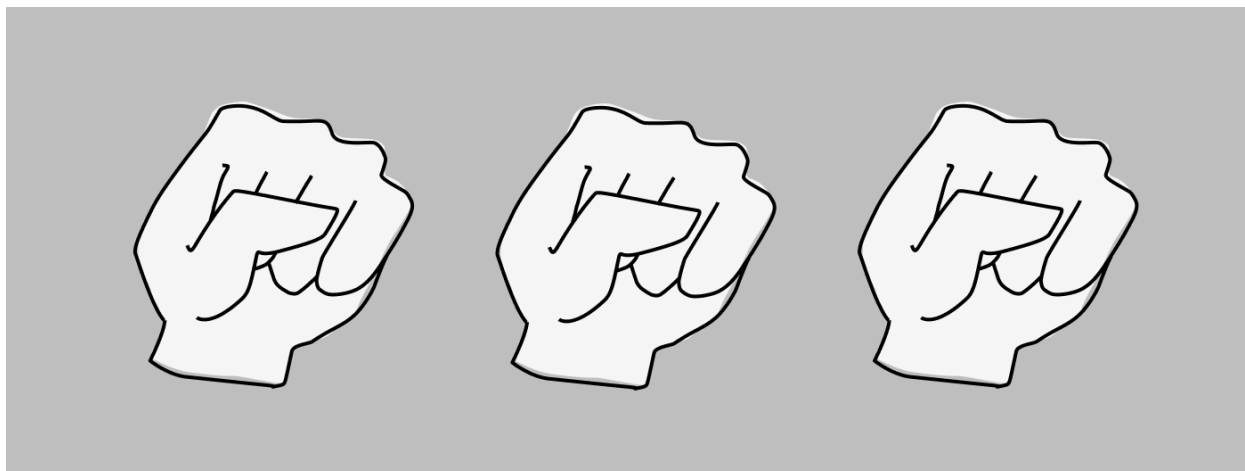
Our daily work stands in stark contrast to the image of a sustainable and ethically conscious corporate culture that companies like Apple like to project.

Furthermore, companies also profit from the convenient side effect of NDAs; making open discussions or employee resistance more difficult. Officially, we are not allowed to reveal to even our closest family members that the end customer is Apple or which projects we are working on. Many of our colleagues do not dare to disclose their salary. The customer's name must not be mentioned even in internal chat conversations and must always be replaced by "the client." At regular intervals, we are explicitly reminded by our managers via email to strictly adhere to the non-disclosure agreements.

NDAs are common in many industries and sometimes make sense and are necessary. In the case of our company, however, they are clearly used to bully employees and to cover up grievances and even legal violations in the industry. NDAs do not need to be justified by the companies and are only reviewed if legal action is taken questioning them, so they remain tools to control and exploit us.



Possibilities and Limits of Resistance



Given these structural problems, it is unsurprising that many data workers are dissatisfied with their work, and especially with the conditions under which they perform it. In my time at our company and through contacts with employees of other outsourcing firms, I have seen that how each individual reacts to this dissatisfaction depends very much on the person. And the dissatisfaction itself is, of course, higher for some data workers than others. Those who come from an economically unstable country or background are sometimes simply happy to have any job at all and to be paid on time. Others are simply too comfortable or hopeless to resist.

The strategies that data workers use, individually or collectively, to fight for their rights are quite different. Some of those affected defend themselves through lawsuits, within workers' councils and trade unions, or through whistleblowing.

The most robust (or most apathetic?) among us have simply withdrawn into their private lives. They focus on their free time, and somehow get by with their salary. But even these "easy-care" employees are seized by anger as soon as they lose their jobs. There are numerous cases of individual legal action against Apple outsourcing companies for wrongful termination and former employees have been able to claim compensation. Particularly data workers who have worked diligently, and compliantly often only dare to really fight for their rights after being dismissed as they attempt to legally obtain appropriate severance pay.

This first form of resistance, individual legal action against outsourcing companies, has also been used by data workers to win accommodations for better compatibility of family and work. Such accommodations are set out in specific legal regulations in Spain, but not all companies adhere to them. For the employees concerned, this is a nerve-racking procedure. The additional stress of legal proceedings is particularly bitter for those who already have difficulty juggling work and family. Especially in the field of data work, it should actually be particularly easy to offer employees flexible remote working arrangements and the possibility of a better work-life balance.

I respect and support anyone who goes that far and fights for their own rights. Unfortunately, neither the outsourcing companies nor the capricious customer Apple seem to be influenced by this type of individual litigation. They pay lawyer fees and compensations, but most cases end in a settlement without even going to trial. No changes are achieved this way.

Secondly, some data workers join together to file class actions and have sometimes achieved considerable success. This way the costs for a good lawyer can be covered jointly, and more extensive data can be presented to the judges. This was the case with discrimination by language region. Various companies have already been convicted, and further legal proceedings are pending⁴.

Yet others organize strikes or form small, independent trade unions. This third form of resistance, however, involves considerable risks. Each day of strike leads to a wage deduction of up to 1.4 days on the payslip. The strikers can hardly sustain that for long, as most of us barely get by on our wages anyway.

For me personally, soon after joining my company it became emotionally difficult to diligently and obediently carry out my rather mindless tasks every day. With each new injustice, my anger and frustration grew. Of course, even before my work as a data worker, I knew that large, international companies, whose primary goal is maximizing profits, do not necessarily show great consideration for their employees. But now I feel it in body and soul, day after day, right in the middle of the EU. And I am also aware that we are probably rather privileged data workers in comparison to our counterparts from the Global South.

⁴ Guerrero Vall, Joan Antoni. 26.03.2024. "Golpe judicial al subcontratista de Meta en Barcelona por discriminar a moderadores según la nacionalidad". El Nacional.
https://www.elnacional.cat/es/sociedad/golpe-judicial-subcontratista-meta-barcelona-discriminar-moderadores-segun-nacionalidad_1185501_102.html



Unfortunately, we can't really rely on the large trade unions. One point in particular shakes militant and solidarity-minded data workers to the core: the contacts at the large trade unions often seem much closer to the company representatives than to the employees. The consultants and lawyers of the large trade unions (specifically CCOO and UGT in Spain) make similar arguments to our direct superiors in the company, from whom I have more than once heard: "That's just the way it is under capitalism. You can go and find another job. And the customer can at any time assign its projects to other companies or move them abroad. So don't complain too much." We feel helpless and angry.

For me, genuine, internationally-oriented solidarity is sorely lacking. It seems that everyone has accepted that the big tech companies hold all the cards. Our rights are being increasingly curtailed, and for many of us, it seems as if we are helplessly at their mercy.

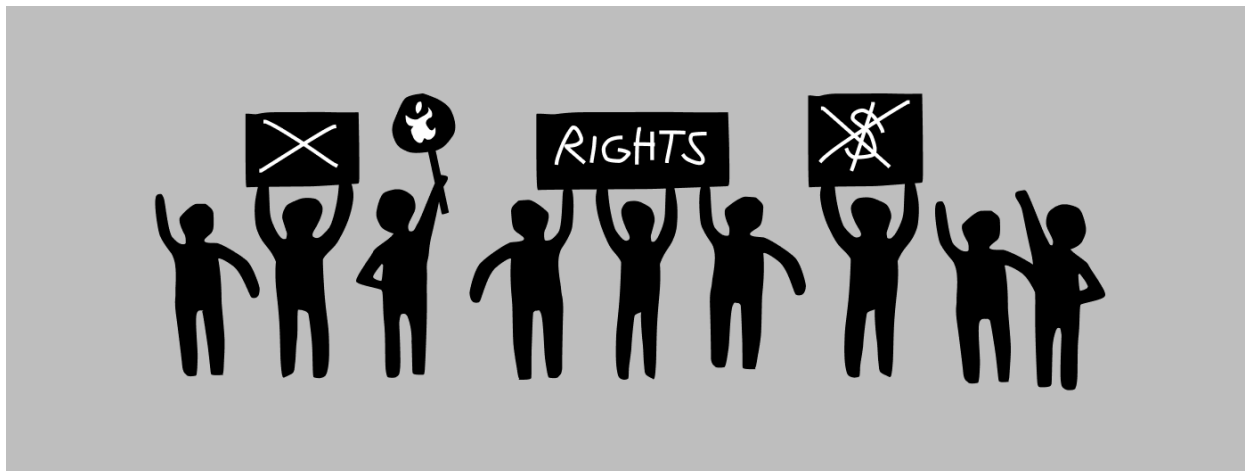
Better support can sometimes be found with smaller, state-independent, and very active trade unions. Particularly important here is access to legal advice and good contacts with lawyers specializing in labor law who are willing to stand up for us for an affordable fee.

Lastly, more and more data workers are rebelling and deliberately breaking the non-disclosure agreements as a form to resist all this misery. And not just by talking to their friends and acquaintances; there have already been several newspaper articles that specifically name Apple. The problem associated with such 'whistleblowing' is something I've already touched on several times. It not only endangers your own job but also that of all your colleagues. The more companies fear that the NDAs will be violated, the more the data workers are in turn controlled and bullied. Employees have to lock away their mobile phones, and surveillance cameras are everywhere. The customer can access our computers at any time.

In general, each of us has a lot of difficult decisions to balance. When is it sensible to resist? Do I fight alone for myself, or together with others? Do I have to fear that this will (initially) worsen the situation? Can I afford it? What consequences might I not have considered? Most of us data workers remain in this employment relationship because we depend on it for various reasons and don't have another job immediately available. Again, we often feel defenseless against large companies.



Our Demands to Society and Policymakers



Most people think that feeding an AI would be an interesting job and that Apple would be a great employer or client. However, these data work tasks are mostly mindless. Broadly, we would like the general public to have a better understanding of the backgrounds and real conditions in the industry, to critically question the tech and AI hype and understand that these “miracle” tools are trained and fed by real people, daily, under difficult conditions.

Politicians, lawyers and judges are usually no better informed about the activities and conditions of data workers than the rest of society. They find it difficult to assign concrete activities to the vague terms content moderator, data annotator or data curator. Even though there is much information and reporting on the conditions faced by data workers, decision-makers seem to remain unaware or choose to ignore it. This industry decisively benefits from the public's lack of knowledge and interest, and data workers bear the consequences.

International companies exploit every opportunity and loopholes in legislation to have as much data as possible produced and reviewed as cheaply as possible. The judicial system cannot keep up with the scale of rights violations by international companies and is definitely overwhelmed. It is particularly frustrating when judgments are ignored or appealed indefinitely: a victory in court is often just the way to the next round. We

wish for and demand legislation with fewer loopholes, more committed controls, and prompt court proceedings.

We need strict and consistent implementation of the EU Supply Chain Act, because such international companies must be dealt with internationally. A company that closes projects in one country and carries out mass layoffs should not simultaneously be allowed to recruit employees in another country for that exact project without penalty. Protection for whistleblowers must also be strengthened; today it is only guaranteed if serious crimes are uncovered, which offers insufficient protection.

We envy the possibilities of works councils in other European countries. In Luxembourg, Germany, and to some extent in France, companies must cover the legal costs of works' councils. Here in Spain, the cost of legal proceedings is a major financial hurdle, especially for small, independent trade unions that finance themselves solely through membership fees. With regulations similar to those in other EU countries, we could fight much more effectively for our rights, and companies would have greater incentives to actually comply with existing laws.

The structural problems of data work described in this text not only have significant negative psychosocial consequences (e.g., sleep disorders or depression) for workers, but also for society as a whole. Families, the healthcare system and social security ultimately end up being burdened, to the benefit of billion-dollar corporations.

Hardly any of my colleagues want to be employed as data workers in the long term, especially under the current conditions. But it is very important to emphasize that things can be done differently. I myself have worked on a project where we had much more room for consultation and participation, which brought great improvements to everyday working life. Data workers should feel appreciated as human beings and workers. This could look like the development of direct employment relationships to create real accountability, higher salaries, more flexibility and co-determination rights, as well as real opportunities for professional advancement or further training. It would also be interesting to have contact with the people who develop AI systems or create the annotation guidelines, and generally to learn more about how the data we review is evaluated and used.



The bad and uncertain conditions to which we, data workers, are exposed have definitely radicalized some of us. Watching the companies repeatedly move their projects from one location to the next, wherever costs are lowest and there is (as yet) no resistance, is deeply frustrating. At times, I have little hope that the conditions for data workers will improve and I see my own engagement more as an attempt to prevent further deterioration. I imagine myself as a small stone in a powerful gear mechanism, so that data workers are not completely run over without any resistance.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that resistance (of whatever kind) can save us data workers from the pointlessness of merely checking and producing absurd data. We wish for more solidarity, and for a committed and critical society, as well as a stronger class consciousness that transcends the boundaries of individual companies and nations.

