



The power of informal transport workers

Dave Spooner

Urban passenger transport in developing countries is dominated by the informal economy. Informal transport workplaces – bus terminals, taxi ranks, motorcycle taxi stands, and minibus parks – are major transport hubs of national economic and political importance.

Most of the world's transport workers are informal. They face police harassment, criminal extortion, job insecurity, low incomes, discrimination, and no access to social security. Yet they provide essential services for millions across the world. In Asia and Africa most urban passenger transport is informal, employing many thousands of workers in a wide range of occupations. Women workers are the most precarious and low paid in the sector, facing discrimination, violence, sexual harassment and abuse. Informal work is now also widespread in the developed world with the proliferation of transport jobs in the 'gig economy'.

Motorcycle taxis, couriers and delivery services are increasingly popular in congested cities. Huge numbers are involved. In Kampala, Uganda, for example, the authorities estimate there are 120 000 boda-boda (motorcycle) operators. In 2013 the boda-boda industry in Uganda was the second largest employer after agriculture, reported Standard Bank researchers (Nasasira, 2015).

In a typical minibus taxi terminal, you will find many different occupations (Spooner and Whelligan, 2017). These workplaces challenge conventional ideas of what constitutes a transport worker. A major bus or taxi park in any city of the global South is a complete micro-economy, where every occupation provides a critical service.

Contrary to popular characterisation of informal transport, there are many thousands of women employed in and around informal transport workplaces. However, women are commonly found in the most precarious, vulnerable and low paid jobs such as cleaning, vending, and catering. Women also face more police harassment – verbal abuse, confiscation of licences, and imposition of fines, from which the arresting traffic police officers gain a commission.

Some still equate the informal economy with the Third World, when in reality informal transport is growing throughout the world. For city-dwellers, the most obvious informal transport workers are the large and growing number of messengers, couriers and delivery workers employed by Uber, Postmates, Deliveroo and other app-based companies.

The motorcycle taxi industry is now attracting the attention of major corporations, with Uber and rival companies fighting over market share of passenger, messenger and delivery services. In Indonesia, for example, 'Go-Jek' has more than 200 000 drivers,

and recently raised \$550 million to fight rivals Uber and Grab. The UK-based Deliveroo has more than 20 000 riders active in 84 cities across 12 countries. Uber itself launched UberMoto in 2016, initially in Thailand, Vietnam and India.

Organising

In 2013, supported by FNV Mondiaal, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) launched the Informal Transport Workers Project to improve unions' capacity to organise among informal transport workers.

The project identified mentor unions in Asia, Latin America and Africa which had demonstrated skills and experience in successful organising. The mentor unions developed new organising methods, adapted from the ITF's strategic organising approach – mapping informal transport hubs, building alliances with informal associations, researching employment relationships, and supporting collective bargaining with employers, governments and transport authorities. Each mentor union developed a programme of support and training with other ITF-affiliated unions in neighbouring countries.

Like most other informal workers, many informal transport workers are already organised, but not necessarily in unions. In a large informal workplace, such as a big city bus terminal or taxi stage, you are likely to find a range of workers' organisations already in place. Some may be completely informal - small self-help groups of workers supporting one another. Others may be large, well-established, formally registered associations or cooperatives. Union organisers and workers are therefore faced with choices amongst different forms of organisation: direct recruitment into the union, strengthening an existing organisation, affiliating associations to the union, or developing new organisations specifically for a group of informal workers.

Organising among informal workers requires a different way of thinking about what a trade union is, and who a union is for. If union activists and leaders have not seriously discussed these issues and reached agreement, such organising initiatives can lead to conflicts of interest, confusion about strategy, and even serious splits and divisions.

Financial sustainability is a major question. Many informal transport workers earn little and erratically, and are vulnerable to external economic shocks. Some people have claimed that it is impossible to build a financially sustainable union on informal workers' dues.

The most common systems for collecting union dues are clearly not appropriate. 'Check-off' systems, for example, are obviously near-impossible when so many of the workers are self-employed, or informally employed on a day-to-day basis. Direct collection of regular cash payments from individuals is good for

keeping contact between members, activists and leaders, but difficult.

But some informal workers' associations are financially strong, with the members applying their considerable administrative and financial skills to the task. Methods of subscription collection range from cash systems to the application of new mobile phone-based banking systems. The ITF is currently exploring this option with a number of informal transport worker organisations.

Power for workers and unions

'Trade union membership means power for informal workers. Mass membership of informal workers means power for trade unions,' (John Mark Mwanika, Amalgamated Transport & General Workers Union (ATGWU) Uganda).

The ITF project achieved some remarkable results between 2013 and 2016. More than 100 000 informal transport workers were newly organised into ITF-affiliated unions. New unions were launched in three countries, and fifteen unions in nine countries adopted new organising strategies specific to informal workers. Membership of women informal workers in the union increased 300% and women were newly elected to represent informal women workers on national union committees in six countries. Throughout the project, participating unions described, shared and debated the key issues facing informal transport workers, identified from their local experiences in mapping and organising. Discussions led to an international workers charter demanding respect for basic rights, union recognition, access to social protection, and an end to harassment, exploitation and corruption. This subsequently became the focus of events staged by informal transport workers' unions in the ITF's Action Week in October 2016.

Most dramatically, the ATGWU's membership in Uganda expanded from fewer than 5 000 to more than 80 000 workers within three years through the affiliation of informal workers' associations, particularly those representing boda-boda taxi operators and minibuss taxi workers.

The Kampala Operational Taxi Stages Association (KOTSA), representing 36 000 taxi workers, affiliated to Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU) in 2015. The process led to running battles between workers and the police, who were determined to prevent democratic elections in KOTSA required to affiliate to ATGWU. At one time police occupied the ATGWU compound. The police action was firmly resisted by ATGWU leaders, declaring that organising the taxi drivers was a legal and bona fide trade union activity. ATGWU announced to the media that it was calling a strike in protest against the police closure of its offices, with the threat of shutting down the airport and – with KOTSA membership on the streets – bringing Kampala to a standstill. President Museveni, fearing an escalation of action by ATGWU and KOTSA supported by the ITF, ordered the police to back down.

The confrontation and subsequent victory proved to be a pivotal moment in organising informal workers for ATGWU and other unions in East Africa. The event was widely publicised in the media, and had an enormous impact on the morale and

confidence of informal association members. It was not only a victory against police interference in the business of the associations, but against the day-to-day police harassment and extortion of informal transport workers.

The experience of the ITF project again proves that it is possible to organise informal workers. In many countries, the decline in formal employment has reached a critical point where unions are unable to meaningfully represent workers to employers or government, or face complete collapse. For some unions, recruiting large numbers of informal workers has become essential for survival. Despite the difficulties and challenges, there is little choice.

The project also encourages us to remember our own history. In the very beginning of the labour movement, all workers were informal workers. The earliest trade unions in the world were formed by informal workers, who pioneered the struggles for what we now call 'decent work'. Increasingly in the 21st Century, global changes in the economic and political climate mean small and shrinking islands of decent work are struggling to survive in rising seas of informal and precarious employment. Many unions are having to relearn how and why unions were created in the first place.

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- Reports, videos, background documents and more details of the project can be found at <http://www.informalworkersblog.org/>



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