

NETWON Report on Trade Union Education Programme to e-rickshaw drivers in eastern part of Nepal (4 February 2016)

by Ajay Kumar Rai (President of NETWON)



Slogan from Nepal E-rickshaw Drivers Union (affiliated With NETWON) -

" E-rickshaw - Not the cause of , But the solution to Pollution "

We had conducted educational programs for forming a trade union under the informal project of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) to organize e-rickshaw drivers in Western Nepal in the past. Along the same line, we conducted trade union education program for the leaders of the formed unit committee, which unit committees were organized approx 4-5 months ago who have already been affiliated to the union in Eastern Nepal. Now, there are 7 active and functional Unit Committees of Nepal e-rickshaw Driver's Union in Sunsari, Jhapa, and Morang districts in eastern Nepal.

While conducting the educational programmes in eastern Nepal, we tried to understand their problems and find their solutions through group discussion. Some of their problems concern the local government authorities while others need to be solved with the involvement of the Transport Ministry and transport departments in the central government in Kathmandu. We found that the problems faced by the e-

rickshaw drivers in the different places to be of similar nature. Lack of parking facilities, the absence of a clear policy of the government regarding e-rickshaws, non-issuance of driving license despite the policy to distribute them, sale of more than the required number of e-rickshaws under the influence of e-rickshaw sellers, lack of knowledge of traffic rules, no official fare set are some of the common problems that they are facing.

We handed over the responsibility of solving the problems faced by e-rickshaw drivers at the local level to the district and regional committees of NETWON by liaising with the local authorities. For the problems we need to address from the capital by working with the central government, NETWON national committee assumed the responsibility of working towards the solutions.

In the program conducted at Birtamod of Jhapa district, two women and one differently abled person were also included. We had discussed their conditions and history and how they became e-rickshaw drivers, which has been included in this report. While conducting the educational programs in various parts of Nepal, we were happy to find some women who have been working as e-rickshaw drivers. In the Birtamod Unit Committee (Jhapa District) , the treasurer and a member were women in the working committee. We have requested our e-rickshaw driver friends from Birtamode to include all the women drivers and form a separate sub committee of the women drivers as well under the Birtamode Unit committee.

The following are the details of the e-rickshaw drivers based on our conversation with them:

1. **Name : Ram Maya Rai (aged 51, unmarried)** had worked as a carpet weaver in a factory in Kathmandu for a long time. After that, she went to Kuwait to work as a migrant labourer where she worked for about two years. She said that she didn't want to work staying away from her homeland. After returning from Kuwait, she saw e-rickshaws plying her hometown and she was attracted to this profession. Thereafter, she took out a loan from the bank and bought an e-rickshaw and started driving it around 11 months back. She leaves home for work at 9 in the morning and returns at around 4 in the afternoon. She earns around 900 Nepalese rupees everyday and she is satisfied with her profession. However, she could earn more if she drove till late evening, but she says that she is harangued by drunks and she feels there is not enough security so she stops working in the afternoon. She is an active member of Birtamod Unit Committee and she says that the educational program conducted by NETWON has provided more energy to her.
2. **Prabha Timsina (aged 27)** lives with her seven year old son. She divorced her husband who used to beat and torture her everyday after drinking a lots of alcohol, and moved back to her parents' house around three years back. She wanted to do something on her own without always being dependent on her parents, therefore she bought an e-rickshaw with help from her parents around three months ago. Initially, her passengers used to tease her and even the male e-

rickshaw drivers also used to treat her condescendingly. They used to dissuade her passengers from riding in her vehicle saying that a woman can't drive properly. She heard that NETWON is forming a union in the name of Nepal E-rickshaw Driver's Union and attended the assembly held to form Unit committee, and got the responsibility of the Treasurer. She said that after she assumed the responsibility of the Treasurer, the negativity that she had initially encountered disappeared and her passengers and fellow drivers started treating her differently. She says that she has received the full support of her family in her endeavor to drive e-rickshaw and to actively participate in the union. She says that as a result of the educational program conducted by NETWON, she has realized that she should not be afraid to fight for her rights and she feels happy that she is not alone and glad to find a new family in the union. However, she also says that there is problem for women drivers to work in the evenings.

3. **Lank Bahadur Khadka (aged 34)** is differently abled- he was born without any legs. He holds the responsibility of the Treasurer in the Damak -Lakhanpur Unit Committee under Jhapa district committee. It has been around six months since he started driving e-rickshaw. Prior to that, he had a shop that sold watches and clocks. He is happily married with one daughter. The e-rickshaw that he drives is his own, and he is happy with this profession. He heard that an assembly was going to be held to form the union of e-rickshaw drivers. He participated in the assembly, where he was given the responsibility of the Treasurer. He has been actively involved in some other organizations involving differently – abled people as well. He said that he is very excited due to the educational programs and other activities conducted by NETWON.

From what I gathered during the various programs held in the various districts of both eastern and western Nepal, I found that since e-rickshaws are vehicles relatively new to Nepal, the state should formulate a clear and concrete policy regarding e-rickshaws. I was happy to find female e-rickshaw drivers as well, as there is a bare minimum presence of women working as transport workers in Nepal. I strongly believe that these programs under the informal project of ITF will take the Trade Union Movement in Nepal one step further. It is certain that in the days to come, there will be a good and strong trade union of e-rickshaw drivers in Nepal and the credit for this would go to ITF, FNV, and personally Sister Alana and Brother Dave Spooner.



NETWON President, Ajay Kumar Rai, talks to Lank Bahadur Khadka



National President from e-rickshaw union, Bro. Binod Regmi, addresses meeting



E-rickshaw driver, Ram Maya Rai, who was previously a carpet weaver and a migrant labourer in Kuwait