

How do we organise Informal Transport Workers? Seven Questions...

Notes from presentation to the Africa Regional Leadership Seminar of the ITF Informal Transport Workers Project, Niamey, Niger, 25-27 March 2014.

This presentation acts as an introduction to the ITF's booklet *Organising Precarious Transport Workers*, and the ITF *Organising Manual*, highlighting some of the themes that are particularly relevant to informal workers.



1. Who are the Workers?



Should a union of taxi-drivers also include those who might own two or three taxis? Or twenty taxis?

When does a worker become an employer? The distinctions between 'workers', 'entrepreneurs' and 'employers' can become blurred in the informal economy.

Governments and employers' organisations often promote informal workers as entrepreneurs, and encourage class allegiance with employers, not the labour movement..

Very large numbers of informal and precarious transport operators are 'own-account' or self-employed workers, leasing or buying their own vehicles, and operating as their own micro-business. Inevitably, some manage to accumulate or borrow sufficient money to have more than one vehicle, and may start to hire other workers as operators. They become employers.

Should they be in the union or in an employers' association? At what point should they no longer be seen as having the same interests as a worker? When a truck driver owns two lorries? When a bicycle-rickshaw driver runs a fleet of ten vehicles?

Do they all see themselves to be 'workers'? Are there tensions between workers and 'micro-employers'? Can these tensions be resolved within the union?

2. Are they Already Organised?

The informal workplace, whether on the street, the areas surrounding stations, airports, dock gates, or other busy transport hubs may at first glance seem chaotic and disorganised. But a closer look will almost certainly reveal a high level of organisation, perhaps built up over many years.

Informal transport workers have numerous ways in which they are organised, whether through simple arrangements for orderly queues for passengers, established 'rules' on touting for business, agreed



points for pick-up and set-down of goods or passengers, etc. Sometimes these are organised through informal associations, self-help groups or cooperatives, organically developed by the workers themselves. But there are also numerous examples of informal organisation through criminal gangs, corrupt public officials and police, and protection racketeers.

There may also be a history of other organisations attempting to organise the transport workers, or that already do so – other unions, NGOs, community groups, religious organisations etc. It is also entirely possible that the workers are already members of a trade union, although perhaps never registered, never formally recognised, or ‘disguised’ as another form of organisation.

It is essential to get an understanding of organisation at the street level. What kinds of organisations are there? Have the workers taken up issues or taken action before? What happened? Was it a positive experience? Are there already some workers’ leaders committed to organising on principles of democracy and solidarity?

There are also likely to be a range of supportive NGOs, development agencies, pro-union researchers, community organisations and others, who will be willing to work with the union. Some may wish to develop long-term alliances around common campaigns.

3. Do We Work With NGOs?



The ‘informal economy’ has become a major focus for development agencies and NGOs. These organisations share a broad common agenda of seeking to improve the livelihoods of informal economy workers.

However, there are widely differing approaches, philosophies and strategies underpinning their activities. These range from active support for democratic workers’ organisations, including unions, based on a workers’ rights model; to the encouragement of entrepreneurship, micro-finance development etc., based on a

business model of development, possibly hostile to trade union organisation.

In some cases, NGOs receive money from government and foundations etc. to work with informal workers, and their livelihoods depend on exclusive contact with ‘their’ group of workers. Some may even be disguised employers. They may see democratic workers’ organisations as a direct competitive threat. Therefore caution required when dealing with some NGOs. On the other hand, good local NGOs may have the resources, skills and experience to really help.

4. What is Collective Bargaining?

Collective bargaining is at the heart of all trade unionism. But who are the bargaining counterparts when there is no employer?

Collective bargaining is not restricted to workers in a clear employment relationship. Informal and precarious workers all face a range of organisations and institutions who have a



direct and sometimes dramatic impact on their livelihoods, conditions and rights. These are the bargaining counterparts. Examples:

- National and local governments, including departments responsible for transport infrastructure, urban planning, vehicle registration and traffic regulation, environmental protection and sustainability, tourism and economic development.
- Police, both national and local, particularly traffic police and border police.
- Infrastructure operating companies (whether state-owned or privately owned), including bus stations, airports, ports, and railway stations.
- Anti-Corruption Agencies – specialist government departments, international agencies (OECD etc)
- Suppliers and vendors essential for informal transport operators, including fuel-sellers and vehicle leasing companies
- Social protection agencies, government departments, international development agencies, major NGOs. Access to social security and healthcare are major priorities for informal and precarious workers.
- Banks. Debt and access to affordable credit is a major problem for informal and precarious workers.



5. Is the Union Fit for Purpose?

Before we start to organise, we have to make sure that our union has agreed policies, services and a constitutional framework (membership rules, structures, procedures etc.) which meet the needs of precarious workers, and enables them to be fully active members.

It may require changes to the way the union works and the allocation of resources.

For some activists, it might require a different way of thinking about what a trade union is, and who a union is for. Some may be uneasy or even hostile about the idea.

Sadly, some divisions are caused by long-standing union leaders who resist the large-scale recruitment and organisation of precarious and informal workers out of fear that they may lose their positions. It is of course inescapable that if a union organises a large new group of workers, they have every right to stand for election and challenge those holding power.

Ask what will the union look like in ten years if we do not successfully organise and represent precarious and informal workers in our country?

6. *Is it Sustainable?*

The importance of membership dues!

Many informal transport workers earn little, earn erratically, and are vulnerable to external economic shocks. This is often the reason why some unions do not attempt to collect membership fees from the workers – and some federations do not demand membership fees from their affiliated organizations. These organisations are wholly dependent on financial support from donor organizations

Most unions recognize that membership dues are essential, even if they are small. The regular collection of fees and accounting for income and expenditure helps bind together members and leaders, and helps hold the leadership to account. If sufficient attention is given to the collection of membership dues, even though the total amounts may be relatively small, it may at least enable the organization to function during periods of scarce external funding – albeit perhaps without paid staff or offices.



7. *Donor Funding?*

Many organisations are destroyed by inappropriate levels and conditions of external funding. Even modest amounts of external funding can create competition and division between leaders and struggles for control over resources.

External finance can also undermine the independence of the organization. It is hard to return to a more modest operation with the voluntary effort of the members and unpaid elected leaders when money dries up.



When sources of grant assistance are cut, and the contractual conditions become more strenuous, there is a danger that policies and programmes of the union are less in response to the democratically expressed needs of the members, and more in response to donor organisations.

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