

ITF Informal Transport Workers Project



LATIN AMERICA REGIONAL LEADERSHIP SEMINAR

BOGOTA, COLOMBIA, 27-29 OCTOBER 2014

Seminar Report



With special thanks to SNTT, Emiliano Assisi (ITF), Lucia Obregón and Luis Obregón (interpreters) for their support.

Dave Spooner, December 2014.

Supported by FNV Mondiaal





Introduction

This was the third regional leadership seminar of the ITF Informal Transport Workers Project: bringing together leaders from transport unions in Colombia, Venezuela and Costa Rica. There were 15 men and 2 women participants.

The objective of the seminar was to share and discuss strategies for the successful organisation of informal and precarious transport workers, the inclusion of women workers, and the revision and reform of trade union structures and procedures to enable informal workers to play a full and active part.

Mapping the informal workplace

The seminar was launched with a group activity for all the participants among transport workers in the main bus terminal ('La Terminal') in Bogota. Each small group was asked to spend an hour or more interviewing workers in and around the terminal to undertake a simple mapping exercise, and then present a report to the plenary group upon return.

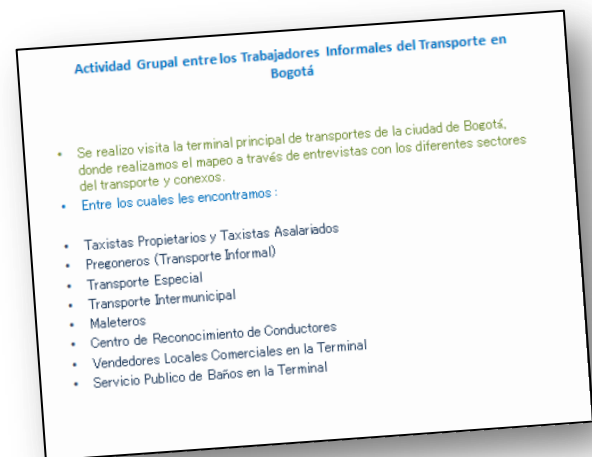
The four groups were asked to discover:

- What the workers do for a living (occupations)?
- How much do they earn?
- What are the employment relationships?
- Are they organised? If so, how?
- What are the key issues faced by the workers?
- Who are (or could be) their 'bargaining counterparts'?

If time permitted, they could ask a number of further supplementary questions:

- How many workers are there in the workplace? How many men? How many women?
- Where do workers meet when not working (restaurants, bars, churches etc)
- Where do they live?
- How old are they?
- Are there specific ethnic or social groups in the workplace?
- What time do workers start / finish work?

The activity was designed to give the participants a shared practical experience and common reference point which could inform subsequent discussions, as well as provide an introduction to aspects of the underlying organising methodology of the project (see [ITF Organising Manual](#)). The non-Colombian participants had the opportunity to learn some of the underlying issues in the Bogota transport industry. It also served as a good immediate ice-breaker for the group as a whole.



LA TERMINAL, BOGOTA

From the combined presentations from the groups, it was possible to build a picture of the terminal's workforce:

	Earnings per day	Employment Relationships	Key Issues	Bargaining Counterparts
'Urban Dispatcher'	COP 550,000 per month		Very long working hours	
Bus Owner-Driver	Not known	Owner-driver, self-employed but within a cooperative (COOTRANSFUSA)		COOTRANSFUSA
Porter ("Maletro")	COP 15-20,000 ¹ per day	Informal self-employed – paid in tips from passengers	Harassment from drivers. High cost of transport to and from work (COP 4,000 per day)	
Luggage Trolley Collector	Minimum wage (COP 616,000 per month), +/- 25,000 per day	Employed by terminal	Very low wage, no social benefits	Terminal de Transporte SA ²
Bus Cleaner	COP 15,000 per day	Employed by out-sourcing company (nominally a cooperative?)	Only has 10-15 minutes rest per 8 hour day (six day week)	Out-sourcing company
Toilet Attendant	Minimum wage (COP 616,000 per month), +/- 25,000 per day	Employed by out-sourcing company (nominally a cooperative)	Long hours, plus long journeys to/from work.	Out-sourcing company
Watchman (car park security)	COP 25-35,000 per day	Informal self-employed – paid in tips by car-owners	Very long hours (10 hours per day, seven days per week) plus two hours travel to/from work.	
Retail workers in terminal concessions (coffee shop, snacks etc)		Casually employed by owner	No job security, disregard for employment rights (instant dismissals etc)	Concession owners
Fuel Pump Attendant	Minimum wage (COP 616,000 per month), +/- 25,000 per day	Employed by fuel company on long-term contract, with social benefits.	Has pay deducted when mistakes made.	Fuel company (Exxon)

¹ USD 1.00 is the approximate equivalent of 2,000 Colombian Peso (COP)

² Terminal de Transporte SA is the terminal operator, a 'mixed-economy' company, linked to the Secretary of Transportation of the Mayor of Bogotá, and in effect under local municipal control.



	Earnings per day	Employment Relationships	Key Issues	Bargaining Counterparts
Mechanic	COP 660,000 per month, plus commission	Employed out-sourcing company (cooperative?)	No social protection; no protective clothing	Out-sourcing company
Taxi Driver³	COP 1,100,000 - 1,300,000 per month	Self-employed owner-driver	Personal security. Long hours (12-14 hour shifts) and long journey to/from work	Police, municipal government
Pregonero ('Call boy' / 'Barker')	COP 500 per passenger fare secured	Informal self-employed, paid by drivers/ bus operators	Very insecure income. Harassment from police and drivers	Police, drivers, terminal operator.
'Special Transport' Taxi⁴ Driver		Self-employed, but have to pay COP 35-40,000 per day to vehicle owners	No social protection	Vehicle owners
Security Guard (Terminal)	COP 1,300.000	Employed by fuel company on long term contract	No respect for the workday	Security company
Security Guard (Taxis)	COP 420,000 per month	Informal self-employed-paid in tips by car-owner	Long working hours. No social security	Terminal de transporte S.A.

³ In Bogotá and other major cities the number of taxis are regulated by a 'cupo' (quota) system, where licences are allocated on a one-off payment of COP 90-120 million (USD 45-60,000). The cupo owner can be the driver, the owner, or a third-party. The system generates corruption and nepotism on a large scale.

⁴ "Special Transport" vehicles, growing in number, are essentially pick-up trucks and large 4X4s (normally white) operating as private taxis, and exempt from some of the normal taxi regulations. According to SNTT, self-employed drivers have to pay substantial sums (COP 35-40,000 per day) to the owners for the use of the vehicles. These were made legal by a new decree in 2005 (Decree 164), and has led to a major problem of over-supply of vehicles in the taxi industry.

Organisation

With few exceptions, all the workers interviewed were all highly precarious. Truly informal workers included the self-employed porters, the watchmen in the car parks and the 'Pregoneros' (ticket agents/ touts). Not surprisingly, women were to be found among the most precarious workers. Most of the bus cleaners, toilet attendants, retail workers and fuel-pump attendants are women.

None of the workers interviewed were members of a union, or any other form of organisation. The only exception was the bus owner-driver, who was self-employed, yet 'employed' within COOTRANSFUSA, a cooperative (www.cootransfusa.com.co), although it was unclear who the members of the cooperative were, or whether they were entitled to attend cooperative meetings. The driver was a member of UNIFER, a trade union of the workers organised within the cooperative.

Many of the workers interviewed explained that they were working for out-sourcing companies supposedly registered as cooperatives. Group participants argued that these were 'false' cooperatives, with little or no democratic organisation, and are used as a power base to resist union organisation⁵.

In a few interviews, the groups were able to ask specifically about their attitudes towards trade unions. Some of the women, notably the bus cleaner and the coffee shop assistant were actively

interested to know how they might join or create a union. One of the groups reported that among taxi drivers who were particularly precarious (i.e. neither salaried or owner-drivers) the dominant view was that "each driver is an island", with no idea of unions or that unions were 'good for nothing'. There was little unity or solidarity among the drivers and little

belief that protective employment laws would ever be implemented. The group concluded that there was a real and urgent need for a democratic union.

The lethal organising context in Colombia

Colombia continues to be one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a trade unionist. On the Atlantic coast, just prior to the seminar, the Black Eagles (Águilas Negras), the paramilitary group linked to drug cartels, money-laundering and other elements of Colombia's huge illegal economy, declared that SNTT to be a target, and in February 2014 murdered one of SNTT's activists in the region. In addition to murder and intimidation from gangs and paramilitaries, democratic unions also face competition from numerous corrupt and employer-dominated 'yellow' unions.

⁵ According to the ITUC Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, there are problems related to various contractual arrangements, such as workers' cooperatives, service contracts and civil and commercial contracts, which cover genuine employment relationships and are used to prevent workers setting up trade unions. A law of July 2008 on workers' cooperatives has not resolved the situation, say the trade unions. In 2011, the government adopted a decree which stipulates that no worker, including the workers associated with cooperatives, could be hired without the labour rights established in law, and imposes severe penalties on cooperatives that practice labour mediation.



Organising Experience

SNTT Colombia

Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores del Transporte (SNTT), the National Union of Transport Workers, was finally registered in 2010 after a four-year struggle with the authorities. SNTT seeks to organise all transport and transport services workers in Colombia, whether sea, air or land. All transport workers are eligible to join, whether in state sector or private sector, and inclusive of informal and precarious workers, such as vendors, mechanics etc. The government recognised that if successful, the union would be capable of paralysing the country, and saw SNTT as a direct threat.

Since registration, SNTT has organised 1,500 workers. The union estimates that there are 1,750,000 transport workers in Colombia, of whom 1,400,000 are informal. There are 700,000 taxi drivers alone. SNTT was instrumental in a recent governmental decree (1047) that extended social protection to taxi drivers, including health care and pensions.

One of the priority organising issues for SNTT is the introduction of the **Bus Rapid Transport (BRT)** system. First introduced in Brazil in the 1970s, BRT systems build a dedicated right of way (busway) to avoid traffic congestion in major cities. They are for the exclusive use of BRT company buses. The introduction of BRT is now a worldwide phenomenon, with the model in Latin America being now being introduced in many cities in Asia and Africa with the encouragement and assistance of the World Bank and regional banks. In Bogotá, the BRT company TransMilenio⁶ is aggressively anti-union. Union activists face instant dismissal. SNTT is currently in a tribunal hearing with the company.

The major problem of BRT is that the smaller traditional buses are being pushed out of business, and thousands of the workers employed – many informally – are losing work or facing even greater levels of exploitation. In Colombia (not just Bogotá), just 12 families now control the BRT systems, threatening 24,000 independent owners of traditional services (buses, ‘busetas’ and minibuses/microbuses). Many of the owners are former military personnel with control or influence over tribunals and judges. Drivers routinely get dismissed when they join the union, and SNTT then fights to have them reinstated. Members meet underground.

Some of the traditional bus companies have now signed collective bargaining agreements with SNTT, covering around 500 workers.

A representative from Medellín explained that informal workers are on the edge of legality. In the shanty towns on the outskirts of the city, and beyond the BRT system, people hire out their private cars as informal taxis, and are frequently seized by armed criminals. In the far outskirts, where the transport infrastructure is extremely poor, passengers are forced to rely on informal transport

⁶ TransMilenio opened to the public in December 2000. New lines were gradually added and by 2012, 12 lines totalling 112 km (70 mi)[2] ran throughout the city becoming the world's largest system of bus rapid transit. Each line has numerous elevated stations in the center of a main avenue. Passengers typically reach the stations via a bridge over the street. Usually, four lanes down the center of the street are dedicated to bus traffic. There are both express and local buses, the latter stopping in every station to pick up passengers. The outer lanes allow express buses to bypass buses stopped at a station.



controlled by the paramilitaries and organised crime. The conditions for working class commuters were described as appalling.

The Medellin authorities only recognised owners' associations in negotiations over the transport system. SNTT subsequently organised hundreds of taxi drivers to blockade municipal buildings to demand recognition, which they won.

SNTT immediate organising aims are to gain a 300% increase in the number of collective bargaining agreements, organise among informal transport workers and organise the BRT workforce.

Few days before the realization of the seminar (October 20) a strike occurred in Bogotá against the extent of the mayor to impose a restriction two digits for the circulation of public service vehicles based on the last number plate. SNTT played a leading role during the protest as one of the leaders of the strike but at the last moment when the agreement was given with the mayor, SNTT was removed from the negotiating table and the other actors of the strike were fooled by signing an agreement than the city administration never fulfilled.

Although the city was paralyzed for four days outcomes were very poor, however SNTT was strengthened in the media.

Costa Rica

The Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores y Afines del Transporte (National Association of Transport and Allied Workers) – ANATRAT - is a very new union which, with the help of the ITF, developed statutes to become capable of organising workers throughout the transport sector.

The union's first priority is to organise among Costa Rica's 13,000 taxi drivers, followed by lorry and bus drivers. They face the major problem of a yellow union, the pro-government 'National Forum of Taxi Drivers', which is under the control of the taxi radio operators. They are also concerned about the problems of membership due collection: how to convince drivers to pay, even though they have a very low net income.

In discussion, they explained that Costa Rica law prohibits anyone owning more than one taxi, but many get round the law through an illegal trade in registration plates etc. Drivers are obliged to pay social security, but their livelihoods are precarious nonetheless. In addition, there are a large number – perhaps 20,000 - of semi-legal informal door-to-door taxi operators. The government attempted to legalise these workers, but only 3,000 registered. The union is not interested in organising the remaining 17,000, suggesting that they are dominated by drug dealing and prostitution. They explained that the illegal taxis operate freely in parts of San José which are no-go areas for formal taxis.

Venezuela

The Venezuelan group represented three unions: the *National Union of Air Transport Workers*, representing all workers in and around the airports (except taxis, which have their own union), formed in November 2014 as a merger between regional unions, with members among the 25,000 aviation workers; the *National Railway Workers' Union*, representing 1,800 members out of the



4,000 workers in the rail industry; and *Union of Workers of CA Metro de Caracas* representing 8,200 workers in the Caracas underground metro workers, founded in 2003. All three unions are members of the Bolivarian Federation of Transport Workers.

According to the group participants, the Venezuelan unions have little experience in attempting to organise informal workers, believing that the government provides a guarantee of their rights and provision of social protection, and that the conversion of 'informal to formal' will be achieved through government action.

Organising Strategy / Action Plans

Costa Rica

Of the estimated 20,000 informal taxis in Costa Rica, more than 4,000 have been declared to be legal, and given formal status for door-to-door services. A proposal will be made to the Executive Committee that these will form the first organising focus, with 1,000 taxi drivers as the target, starting in the main urban areas. The main issues to be addressed will be the excessively long hours (routinely 12 hours per day), lack of social protection and professional insurance. The key potential bargaining counterparts will be the Ministry for Public Works and the semi-independent Council of Public Transport, responsible for the registration of public transport.

It was noted that about 1,300 drivers are already represented through (genuine) cooperatives, but the fake cooperatives dominate representation to local government. An important part of the organising strategy will therefore focus on the rights of taxi drivers to elect their own representatives. Of the 57 elected deputies in parliament, there are three or four who support the union, and will assist in ensuring that the representation of drivers is achieved through the law, rather than by presidential decree.

Secondly, the group proposes to focus on bus drivers, with a target of 200 to be organised. These drivers work for one of the 1,600 small route-owners ('concesionarios'), each of which may have up to 10 buses, and thus 10 employed drivers. The drivers are unfairly heavily penalised when the automated sensor systems that count passengers on and off vehicles do not match the reality of fares collected.

Thirdly, they propose organising among fuel-tanker drivers, with an initial target of 50 drivers. These drivers deliver fuel to petrol stations, but receive little training, and inadequate safety equipment, clothing etc.

ANATRAT has its own radio programme, and this will be a major tool in the organising strategy, along with leafleting, use of other media, and direct face-to-face work with the drivers themselves.

Venezuela

The group proposes to develop a proposal to their federation to create a new union for informal and precarious transport workers. They intend to focus on organising among the countless numbers of motorcycle taxis ('moto-taxis'), which have mushroomed in response to the huge traffic jams and



the inability of trains and the metro system to cope in rush-hours. They urgently need organising, training, education and leadership.

Initially they intend to concentrate on moto-taxis in Caracas, with an initial target of 600 members, organising 50 per month through direct face-to-face contact, after a mapping exercise to determine key issues. Some are already organised through cooperatives and associations, but there is no trade union presence. A key element of the organising strategy will be to hold a sequence of meetings between the leadership of cooperatives and associations with the union federation leaders.

[It was noted that motorcycle-taxis are growing in number throughout the region, especially in areas of high poverty, but are seen as highly dangerous. There had been a decree in **Colombia** that had banned passengers from motorcycles for security reasons (with the exception of carrying female family members), but this was overturned by a campaign waged by motorcycle clubs. As a result, large numbers of motorcycle-taxis are now appearing on the streets.]

Colombia

The Colombia group proposed an ambitious 12-month organising campaign, at the end of which they plan to have organised 1,300 taxi drivers and 800 bus and other drivers. It was noted that they want to build on the success of gaining two collective bargaining agreements with bus companies, covering more than 350 workers. In some regions, the seeds are already planted with activists in place. The next stage will be undertake more systematic mapping of the taxi industry, followed by a communications campaign (leaflets, newspapers etc) focused on building power against those national government policies that adversely affect land transport workers.

The group noted that long-distance drivers have to go through weigh-stations every 50km, paying COP 8,000 each time. Other issues include lack of social protection, lack of security against organised crime, and the disappearance of the smaller bus companies.

Training and education will have to be a central element of the organising strategy, recognising that most of the target workers have little or no trade union experience, and frequently identify with employers and/or government. Training is needed for both members and non-members in collective bargaining, labour law, workers' rights etc, encouraging them to join as *active* members. The organising strategy will be primarily based on face-to-face engagement, with particular emphasis on women and young workers.

Nevertheless, the seminar was strongly reminded that the conditions in Colombia are far from conducive for open organising or campaigning. In the city of Popayán in Colombia's south-west, for example, the union was forced to organise underground. The region is very poor, and dominated by coca production and organised crime. The union had organised 320 bus drivers, but all of them were on fixed-term contracts. They were told to leave the union or not have a renewed contract. The bus companies themselves are owned by the paramilitaries, and the far right are in political control. The union also faces yellow unions, bought by the employers. Many trade union leaders sold out to the enemy.

A major element of the organising strategy therefore has to be concerned with organiser training in the context of extremely antagonistic employers, and the need to develop tactics and techniques .



Evaluation

Summary of feedback from participants.

Positive Experiences

- Learning about strategies and policies to organise workers and building unions
- The exchange of culture, experience, plans and *ideas* between trade union leaders
- Inspiration from the realisation that exemplary women are fighting in all the countries, that we have no fear, and the struggle continues
- Discussion between the union participants from Venezuela on one hand, and Colombia and Costa Rica on the other, representing two very different traditions and perspectives on the role of trade unionism: “two extremes – one idea”.
- Strengthened links between ANATRAT and SNTT
- Gaining insight into the differing cultures, legal contexts and government in the three countries.
- The opening discussions and debates and the mapping activity in the bus terminal .
- “The mapping model is very interesting... I’m going to use it in my region because I think it is the first step to reach out to would-be trade union members”.
- The methodology in locating formal, informal and precarious

Negative Experiences

- Some of the participants were frequently late arriving for sessions.
- Some of the internal issues within the participating unions were allowed to spill over into the international discussion.

Suggested Improvements

- More time was needed

Suggestions for future ITF education events

- Orientation and training for women trade union leaders, with both men and women participants, so that gender equality issues can be discussed internally.
- To continue with more seminars and workshops involving the same participants, on each and every topic of trade union education
- More regular seminars “Educational activities should take place more regularly, to enrich our knowledge and to have the capacity to disseminate it throughout our regions and countries”.

Many thanks to Luis Obregon for translation of notes from the evaluation session.



SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS			
Javier Mauricio Suarez Pineda	Bus Driver	SNTT	Colombia
Ruben Cabarcas	Taxi Driver	SNTT	Colombia
Orlando Hernandez	Taxi Driver	SNTT	Colombia
Emiliano Lopez	Taxi Mechanic	SNTT	Colombia
Carlos Estrada Leiva	BRT's Bus Driver	SNTT	Colombia
Francisco Mora	Administrator Terminal	SNTT	Colombia
Mauricio Roque	Bus Driver	SNTT	Colombia
Alfredo Medina	Taxi Driver	SNTT	Colombia
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