



ORGANISING PRECARIOUS TRANSPORT WORKERS



Growing numbers of informal and precarious workers are in the world's transport industry.

Many unions organise these workers, and adapt their organising strategies accordingly.

Informal and precarious workers **can** organise themselves, and unions can be representative of **all** transport workers.

This booklet can help.

Many of the ideas and experiences used in this handbook are drawn from the ITF's affiliates themselves, particularly the ITF's young members.

This booklet was prepared for the ITF by Dave Spooner, Global Labour Institute (UK), with thanks to Sean Sayer, Annie Hopley and Celia Mather

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Unless indicated otherwise, all quotes and examples are from the ITF's survey of informal and precarious work, conducted between September and December 2012. Our thanks to all that contributed to the survey.

Geneva – Manchester – New York – Moscow

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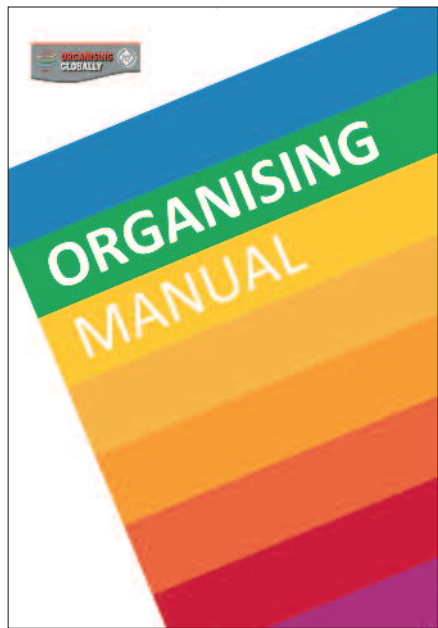
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HOW DO WE ORGANISE?

Read the ITF organising manual!

The basic principles of organising workers are exactly the same, irrespective of their employment status or level of job security. Good planning, fit for purpose union structures, research, and effective organising techniques are needed to build organised power for workers, wherever or whoever they may be.

The ITF has produced the *ITF organising manual* and accompanying PowerPoint training modules; essential reading for union organisers and activists. This precarious transport workers booklet builds on the core methods and techniques of the *ITF organising manual* with some ideas and experiences specific to precarious workers.



The manual is available in Arabic, English, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. Download it, or order printed copies here: www.itfglobal.org/education/organising-manual.cfm

THE RISE OF PRECARIOUS WORK



Meet 'Jorma'. Jorma is a train driver in Finland.

He has a reasonably stable job, and he's fairly confident that he'll continue to earn a decent wage until he retires, at which time he'll receive a pension.

He has access to affordable healthcare supported by the government. There are laws protecting his employment rights. He's in the Finnish Locomotive Drivers' Union, which negotiates his pay and conditions. Jorma is a reasonably happy man.

Jorma has what the International Labour Organization calls **standard employment**.

But among all the transport workers in the world, Jorma is in a small minority. **An increasing number of transport workers are facing more and more precarious and informal work.**



In civil aviation...

Many cabin crews are in a permanent fight against precarious work. *“Although we are permanent employees, we are not guaranteed a set amount of work within a month and cannot say how much we will earn a year. Our employers can decide that there is not enough work and stop us from working for as long as they see fit. Pay is terrible. Some workers over 25 are qualifying for government benefits because pay is so low.”*

Unite the Union activist, UK



On docks and waterways...

“Casualisation is a deliberate strategy to drive down wages and conditions of employment. You wait on the end of a phone to know whether you have work today or not. It can mean excessive long hours or not enough hours of work to make a living. Your income is unstable. Worse still, if you try to improve things at your workplace, you can be easily victimised.”

Maritime Union of New Zealand



On the high seas...

Most seafarers, especially those from outside Europe and North America, are on fixed-term contracts without the security of permanent employment. Even some of those working on vessels covered by ITF agreements are only able to be union members during the period of their contract.



On railways...

Large numbers of jobs are being lost in the rail sector to outsourcing and subcontracting. In Indonesia, for example, workers in ticketing, maintenance, track cleaning and the restaurant cars, are now all outsourced. *“It is very confusing, all the different ways that these employment contracts are organised.”*

Indonesian Railway Workers’ Trade Union (SPKSA)



In urban transport...

“For 20 years minibuses have been the main form of transport in the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi. The economic and political crises in the early 1990s caused an absolute collapse of municipal services, including transport. The gap was filled by informal transport operators using second-hand minibuses from Turkey and Germany, and dilapidated Soviet-produced minibuses from the 1980s. Due to widespread corruption and oligarchic capitalism, transport continued to operate largely as part of the informal economy.”

Motor Transport and Motorway Employees Trade Union, Georgia



In road transport...

“Currently the union has a membership of 3,500 paying members and an estimated 80,000 non-paying members. All our members are informal workers working in transport companies and others in the coach-building industry. The potential membership is estimated to be 314,000 members if they can be organised and be brought on board.”

Kenya Long Distance Truck Drivers and Allied Workers Union



In fisheries...

The seafood processing factory in Lampung, Indonesia, owned by the US-based company Phillips Foods Inc., employs 1,900 workers, of which 96 percent are women and 100 percent are on temporary contracts. *“Many of the workers have worked continuously at the seafood factory for 10 years or more but were denied permanent employment and paid daily wage rates of just USD3.30. A courageous fight was undertaken against the brutal regime of insecure work, and permanent employment for 200 union members was successfully won.”*

Phillips Seafood Indonesia Workers’ Union (IUF)



In tourism...

Throughout the world, workers in the tourist industry face precarious livelihoods, vulnerable to seasonal fluctuation, economic and political crises, and high levels of informality and exploitation.



In transport services...

Workers in service jobs within the transport industry are more likely to be precarious, and more likely to be women, working as cleaners, caterers, maintenance workers, or, as pictured here, selling fuel in Cambodia.



For women workers...

Although women are under represented in the transport workforce as a whole, they are hugely over represented in precarious and informal work, and are most likely to be found in low wage, low status, and most insecure forms of transport employment.



For young workers...

Young workers are at the forefront of the new expansion of precarious work. Many employers deliberately target youth as recruits, into the most precarious and informal jobs.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'PRECARIOUS' WORK?

- Precarious work shifts risks and responsibilities from employer to worker.
- Precarious work breeds uncertainty and insecurity.
- Permanent jobs are replaced with time-limited contracts: fixed-term, short-term, temporary, seasonal, day labourer, and casual labour.
- The relationships between employers and workers become more and more complicated as enterprises are fragmented and dispersed through subcontractors, franchise holders and labour and temporary work agencies.
- Employers disguise their employees as 'self-employed' workers. There are some major companies with virtually no officially recognised employees at all!

Precarious workers are generally paid less, in many cases 50 percent less, than workers on permanent contracts. An agency worker typically does exactly the same job as his or her workmates but with much lower remuneration and no access to benefits. Because of the lack of job security, competition against other agency workers for

posts and threat of redundancy, precarious workers also work longer, more anti-social hours in order to secure a decent income.

The wages and working conditions of precarious workers are of such poor quality that simply being in work is no guarantee of stability or improved living standards. While many people employed through agencies work in the same job for a long period of time without being transferred to a permanent contract, they nevertheless remain temporary workers with the ever-present threat of redundancy. Other precarious workers are forced to move between positions regularly and accept work that is a long distance from home. Migrants and young people suffer greatly from the increase in this type of work because it is the most readily available source of income for people with poor education, poor training and poor future prospects.

There is also a serious impact on health as precarious workers are less likely to receive adequate training and work in the most hazardous jobs. This is combined with an impact on mental health, driven by the pressure of holding down a job

and accepting poor conditions in order to survive. The lack of sick pay and access to health services exacerbates this problem and

exposes precarious workers to the risk of long term unemployment should they fall ill or have an accident.

Hermes 'Lifestyle couriers'

Hermes is the UK's largest home delivery courier network, delivering 115 million parcel deliveries a year, with a turnover of more than USD400 million.

Yet in 2012, it only employed 1,324 people.

The real workforce are 9,000 self-employed 'lifestyle couriers'— 60 percent of whom are women.

According to Hermes workers, they earn GBP0.50 (USD0.80) per delivery, and have to cover all their own expenses, including use of their own vehicles. Generously assuming that they could deliver five parcels an hour in a built-up urban area, they'd be earning GBP2.50 an hour gross. The current adult minimum wage in the UK is GBP6.19 (USD10.00) per hour.

In Germany, the Hermes Logistik Gruppe (HLG) has become the country's largest independent home delivery service for online retailers.

Both are part of the Otto Group, originally a German mail-order company, which claims to be the world's largest online retailer of fashion and lifestyle products.

Temporary work agencies.

Nearly half the respondents to the ITF survey reported that there had been an increase in the numbers of temporary work agencies in their workplace. The large transnational agencies now offer employers the opportunity to run their enterprise with a minimum of staff, with agency labour at the core of operations.

Previously regarded as primarily a means to fill short-term gaps in the workforce (seasonal workers, short-term additional staff etc), temporary agency workers are becoming a permanent feature in many workplaces.

“We are attempting to organise these vulnerable workers, however the temporary work agencies and third party contractors move them around a lot, so it becomes increasingly difficult to form a map of exactly where they all are. Over the last three years, we have seen a steady increase in the use of agency workers, as well as self-employed contractors who force their employees to work illegally or face losing their jobs. There is a trend to employ only precarious workers. I know of sites in England with more than 600 agency workers”.

Noel Coard, Road Transport Commercial Logistics and Retail Distribution National Committee, Unite the Union, UK

“In 2004, the port sector was split into two: the traditional dock work and the new activities, so-called ‘logistics’, in which employers are authorised to recruit their workers outside the traditional pools. Normally this must result in fixed-term contracts, but employers use this opportunity to introduce a massive number of agency workers, often paid under the normal rates”.

Michel Claes, head of water division, ACV Transcom, Belgium

In the worst forms of precarious employment, there are millions of informal workers on the edge of survival, who have little respect given to their rights, and are highly vulnerable to economic and natural disaster.

Informal transport workers generally have to survive on very low incomes, often earning less than USD1.00 per day. In addition, most have to work extremely long hours, and their income is highly irregular. Drivers have expenses such as vehicle rent, bribes, maintenance, petrol, licences and fines, which significantly reduce their daily income. Many transport workers also face debt problems as they struggle to pay the rent for their vehicle and high interest rates to money-lenders.

Discover the benefits of a flexible workforce.

How fast can you adjust? With Manpower, your business can become more agile – and competitive – with a flexible workforce solution. Our contingent staffing solutions deliver the qualified people you need, when you need them.

Reducing your costs

Staff up or down easily in response to business fluctuations, protecting your permanent workforce and controlling costs. With Manpower on your team, the costs associated with hiring, benefits, retirement, taxes and long-term compensation are reduced.

Partnering with you

We work closely with your team to ensure our contingent staffing solutions support your workforce strategies. For many, we're the single resource that can manage all aspects of the contingent workforce.

<http://www.manpowergroup.co.uk/employers/resourcing-services/temporary/>

Because the wages are so low, informal transport workers have to commit to long hours every day in order to make even a subsistence income. The competition for work among those in public transport means it can take a long time to pick up enough lifts to earn the required money. Drivers of freight will often be away from home for days or weeks at a time.

Police, local authorities, border controls and weigh bridges are all potential sources of corruption and bribery for the transport worker. In order to grant access to certain routes or overlook safety regulations,

officials often ask for payment from the workers and often take a significant percentage of their income. Drivers who work on long distance freight also face the dangers of hijacking and theft, which make it difficult for them to take breaks or leave their vehicles unattended.

There are significant problems with poor health and safety standards in the informal transport sector. For example, the condition of the vehicles and their poor maintenance put workers in danger; unpaved roads and driving at high speeds make accidents common both in city centre passenger transport and on long

distance freight. The lack of holiday pay, sick leave, and the long hours required to earn a living mean that workers are under a great deal of stress and exhaustion, which endangers their own, their passengers and fellow road users' safety. The risk of contracting HIV/AIDS is also high for long distance drivers who spend a long time away from their families.

By virtue of being informal, these transport workers are highly unlikely to have access to social protection. Pensions, sick pay, holiday pay and maternity cover are not available in the informal economy leaving workers extremely vulnerable to shock factors. In many developing countries where the informal economy is at its strongest, there is neither state protection nor any employment benefits.

This is our battleground.

Employers, supported by government neoliberal policies, are constantly pushing 'labour flexibility', attempting to shift labour towards precarious jobs. Unions are in a constant struggle to resist and to push back. The financial crises of recent years have intensified the conflict: standard employment is shrinking, the informal economy is expanding, and everyone is under increasing pressure towards ever-more precarious work, especially young and women workers.

How many precarious transport workers are there?

No one really knows precisely, governments rarely collect the information. Evidence suggests that informal workers form the majority of all transport workers in the world.

The ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation) suggests that 50 percent of the world's labour force, over 1.5 billion workers, are in vulnerable employment.

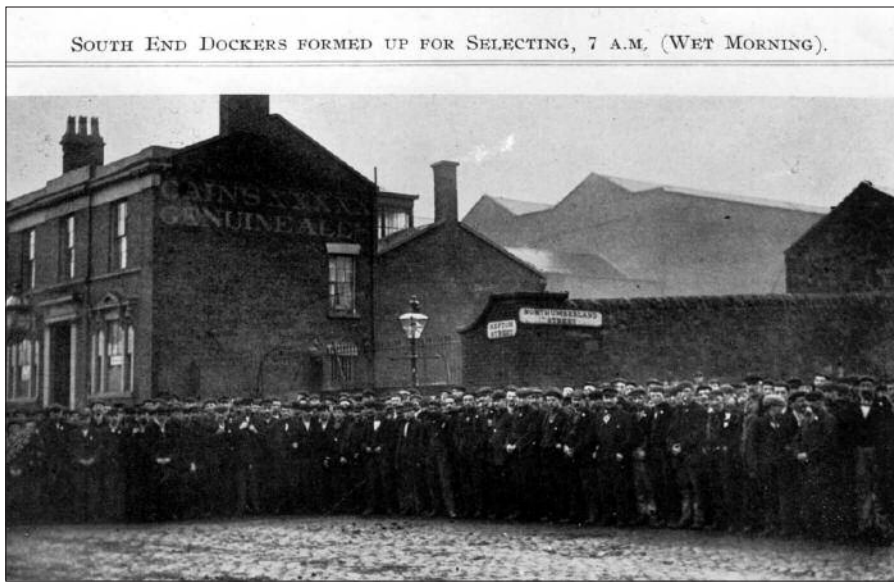
CIETT (International Confederation of Private Employment Agencies), the employers' organisation representing temporary work agencies, estimated in 2009 that there were 72,000 private employment agencies worldwide, with 9 million workers, and a combined turnover of EUR203 billion.

CIETT also calculated that 80 percent of corporations used agency labour, and that 60 percent of agency workers are under 30 years old. Japan accounts for 24 percent of the global market with more than 20,000 employment agencies.

In a survey of affiliates undertaken by the ITF in 2012, 81 percent of respondents reported substantial numbers of precarious workers in their workplaces, with 62 percent reporting an increase. All unions in developing countries reported precarious workers in the workplace, in increasing numbers.

74 percent of all unions and 100 percent of unions in developing countries reported an increase in the numbers of informal transport workers.

IS THIS NEW?



Irish dockworkers queue up for a day's work, 1901

No. Not so long ago all employment was precarious and informal. It was only through the strength of trade unionism in the 20th century that some workers, mostly men, mostly in industrialised countries, began to win secure, long-term jobs with social protection and employment rights protected by law.

Some believed that with industrialisation, more and more workers would enjoy these benefits of good organisation, built by generations of trade unionists, and scenes like the one pictured above would simply disappear over time.

The opposite is true. Unless we organise, transport workers across the world will be pushed back into worsening conditions of precarious and informal employment.

WHY ORGANISE PRECARIOUS WORKERS?

Quite simply, because we have little choice.

While we can do our best to resist the erosion of decent work, we will never win without organising those transport workers who are already in precarious and informal work.

If we fail to organise, unions will simply become more and more marginal, powerless, and irrelevant to the working lives of the vast majority of transport workers.

“We all have a duty to promote the lives of precarious workers. We need to learn what unions have done to assist them, fully know and learn what gains have been achieved through negotiations on their behalf, and what measures unions have put in place to ensure that precarious workers are included.”

**Martin Kapombeza, organiser,
Transport and General Workers
Union, Malawi**

10 KEY QUESTIONS FOR ORGANISERS

1. Is our 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 enable 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, as these comments demonstrate:

“There are still many transport workers permanently employed by large companies who are not yet union members. We should organise them first, before considering informal workers.”

“These agency workers are chasing our jobs. We should simply drive out the agencies entirely, before they drive us out and replace us with cheap labour. We should oppose them, not organise them.”

“These ‘workers’ are not really workers at all. They’re responsible for all the traffic jams, the pollution, the street crime. They just create trouble, and we don’t want them in our union.”

“Informal workers simply cannot afford, or are not willing to pay, proper union dues. This means that either those of us with ‘proper jobs’ will have to subsidise them, or the union will go bankrupt.”

“We’re a union, not a welfare society. These self-employed people are simply looking for opportunities to make money, get cheap loans or expand their business.”

“Some of these workers are barely literate and have no knowledge of the trade union movement. It’s OK to recruit them, but they should only be allowed to stand for election as leaders when they’ve proved their abilities.”

These are not trivial concerns. If the union activists and leaders have not had a chance to seriously discuss these issues, and reach common agreement, the organising initiative will be halfhearted at best. At worst, it could lead to serious splits and divisions later on.

If a serious organising initiative among precarious workers raises questions of major structural change within the union, we have to pay close attention to democratic processes of decision making, ensuring that everyone has had the opportunity to contribute and be heard. The most effective way of doing this is through education and open discussion.

Engage the leadership, activists and members in education and discussion about the changing nature of the transport industry, the growth of precarious and informal work, and the future composition and purpose of transport unions.

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?

Bring some of the informal or precarious workers themselves into the discussion. Invite them to speak at meetings, attend your training courses, write articles for your newsletters.

2. Are we inclusive?

Once the union has agreed policies to organise precarious and informal workers, ask what needs to be done to ensure that they can join the union, and can take a full part in the democratic structures and decision making.

Review the constitution, rules and structures of the union. Does the union constitution enable you to recruit transport workers, irrespective of their employment status?

Some union constitutions may only admit members who have an identifiable employer, or exclude temporary workers, agency workers, self-employed workers or others.

Some union structures assume that workers have a stable employer and a regular workplace – union branches organised around single bargaining units, for example, that may exclude precarious workers.

What would your structures and rulebook look like if the union was to be fully inclusive of informal and precarious workers? Some ITF affiliates already have a constitution that explicitly enables them to recruit and support precarious and informal workers into the union, and to ensure that they are properly represented in the governing bodies and leadership.

In some countries, labour laws may seek to prevent union organisation of informal or precarious workers.

- What laws, regulations and policies relate to this group of workers?
- Are there national labour laws that cover these workers?
- Are there laws that prevent them formally joining a union or registering a union?
- Are there licensing authorities involved? Who are they?
- If the workplace is a public space, what laws and regulations are in force? Who determines them? Who enforces them?

If the law prevents union membership for informal or precarious workers, challenge the law. Banning union membership on the basis of employment relationships is a clear breach of the fundamental right of freedom of association.

Meanwhile, where direct union membership is not appropriate or forbidden under labour law, we need clear and agreed policies to work in alliance with groups of informal and precarious workers who may be organised outside conventional union structures.

There are numerous examples of informal workers' organisations that function as if they were a trade union, but are not registered or recognised as such, including informal associations, self-help groups, co-operatives, and NGOs (non-governmental organisations).

Remember that it's a two-way street. The workers themselves may feel that trade unions are not appropriate for them. Some may even have bad experience of trade union membership in previous employment as these comments illustrate:

"Trade unions have never done anything for us. They're only interested in protecting their well-paid jobs."

"I haven't got the money or time to be involved in a trade union. I'm working all the time. When do I have the time to go to the union office, or attend a meeting?"

"Most of us workers here are young. Unions are just old men in suits. What can they offer us?"

"These unions are all involved in politics. They're more interested in fancy dinners with political leaders than talking to us."

3. Who do we organise?

The question is a little more complex than may be first thought.

Does a lorry driver working for a temporary work agency encourage other non-transport temporary workers to join? Should a union for informal bus drivers also include the workers running the food stalls around the bus station? Should a union of motorcycle taxi drivers recruit roadside fuel sellers? Should the McDonald's workers at a railway station franchise be in the same union as the train drivers? Should a union of taxi drivers also include those who might own two or three taxis? Or 20 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 10 vehicles?

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

4. Are they already organised?

Stupid question? The objective is to build a strong inclusive trade union organisation for precarious and informal transport workers. But maybe they are 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 pickup and set down of goods or passengers, etc. Sometimes these are organised through informal associations, self-help groups or co-operatives, 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?

5. What form of organisation?

Precarious workers are not necessarily willing or able to join or create formally-constituted trade union organisations. Organisers are often faced with choices between different forms of organisation:

Should we recruit informal and precarious workers directly into our union?

Should we strengthen an existing workers' organisation of informal and precarious workers?

Should we be supporting the development of a new organisation?

If creating a new organisation, what is the most appropriate:

- Formally registered trade union?
- Trade union 'disguised' as a voluntary association?
- Co-operative?
- Community-based organisation?
- An informal group, then formalised as capacity and membership develops?

For example, the National Transport Workers' Federation in Burundi (Federation Nationale des Travailleurs des Transports – FNTT), includes both unions and associations, covering

formal and informal workers. FNTT recognised that informal workers were not organised and had many problems.

"We started to make contact with them, but it was not easy because they didn't have any representatives. Even those who had formed associations were regularly harassed by the administration or the police. So the FNTT executive committee went to different transport services, such as trucks, buses, taxis, motorcycles and bicycles, and explained to them the difference between an association and trade union, how they operate, and how to establish either form of organisation."

"They were positively interested and started to create associations such as the Truckers' Association, Truckers' Association of Kayanza, Bus Drivers' Association, Private Drivers' Association, Taxi Drivers' Association and Lorry Drivers' Association. There was also a Motorcycle Taxi Drivers' Association, Bicycle Taxi Drivers' Association and many others in the provinces. All these affiliated to the FNTT."

"The organisation of informal workers has been a great success for FNTT, as many informal workers have formed unions, and now know how to assert their rights."

Deogratias Birihanyuma, FNTT, Burundi

Organising as a co-operative: motorcycle taxi drivers in Rwanda

The Rwandan trade union movement set about re-building in 1995, after the genocide. The ILO SYNDICOOP project worked with Assetamorwa (Association de l'Espérance des Taxis Motos au Rwanda), the organisation of motorcycle taxi drivers. Assetamorwa is a living example of how co-operatives and trade union ideas can combine together to help to organise transport workers in the informal economy.

Members faced major problems of extortionate rental fees for their vehicles. After paying the owner, the petrol, and buying food, drivers were bringing home less than USD1 per day, whereas those that owned their own bikes were able to bring home two or three times that amount. They also faced major problems of crime, health effects of pollution, and restrictive regulations from the authorities.

The drivers recognised that it would be in their interest to combine together as a trade union. Assetamorwa, with 2,500 members, is now well organised and many of these problems have been overcome. Limits to the working day have been agreed, and good progress is being made on improving livelihoods through co-operation. Assetamorwa now uses the tontine system, forming small well-organised groups (there are currently 18) and collecting small amounts of money from individuals. 'Tontine' (or money from the fund) is used to purchase a motorbike. Money is then given to each of the group in rotation.

Assetamorwa also trains young drivers, runs a garage and spare parts depot and negotiates with the traffic police. Members are encouraged to participate in savings and credit co-operatives and this enables them to access long- and short-term loans as a proportion of the shares they own. Assetamorwa has been able to buy 57 motorcycles for members to use.

"Thanks to Assetamorwa, I have the chance to buy my own bike. We support each other and the union negotiates with the traffic police. All motorcycle taxi drivers should join."

Joseph, a member of Assetamorwa

(With thanks to Stirling Smith, Co-operative College)

6. What are the key demands?

The only reliable way to determine the key demands of precarious workers is to listen. The objective is to build union power based on active participation of union members. The demands have to come from the members themselves.

However, from examples provided by ITF affiliates and allies, there are some key general demands to be found worldwide.

All workers

- Freedom of association
- Recognition and collective bargaining rights

Casual workers

- Closing the gap between casual and permanent workers
- Permanent status
- Permanent part-time status for seasonal workers
- Limits on hiring precarious workers
- The right to negotiate hiring
- Challenging discrimination and exclusion
- The right of unions to represent precarious workers
- The right to regular employment
- Stopping outsourcing

Agency workers

- Outlaw agency labour
- The right to join the same union as directly employed workers, and be in the same bargaining unit

Self-employed workers

- Ban 'disguised' employment
- Inclusion in urban and environmental planning policy-making
- Affordable social protection
- Protection from organised crime
- End police harassment and corruption

7. Who are our allies?

We are unlikely to be alone in wanting to empower informal and precarious transport workers. It is important to assess who may be willing to help build a strong and inclusive transport union.

It is important to get the support of organised workers in the ‘formal’ transport economy, and in the supply chains dependant on informal and/or precarious transport workers. This may require some investment of time and energy, particularly where the workers may feel threatened or undermined by the growth of precarious and informal workers in their sector or workplace.

It is sometimes just as important to gain the support of organised informal and precarious workers in other sectors that often share the same workplace (bus stations, markets, busy intersections etc) or may depend on transport workers for their own livelihoods, eg street vendors, market traders, waste-recyclers, tourism and sex workers, and others.

It is important to recognise that many informal or precarious transport workers may have more than one job, or may frequently change jobs. A market stallholder by day might be a taxi driver by night. A lottery ticket

seller on the street today might be a rickshaw operator tomorrow. Many may not define themselves as ‘transport workers’, but simply as making a living on the streets as best they can.

Do we work with NGOs

There are 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.

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. This means 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 is required when dealing with some NGOs. On the other hand, good local NGOs may have the resources, skills and experience to really help.

8. Who are our opponents?

Who has something to lose? There will inevitably be organisations and individuals who will seek to stop the organisation of a strong union for informal transport workers:

Powerful corporations who would like to see informal transport operators cleared off the streets; urban property developers and large private sector transport companies.

Corrupt politicians, public servants and police who depend on bribes and kick-backs from informal transport operators.

Criminal gangs running protection and extortion rackets

'Community leaders' and anti-union NGOs dependant on grants to provide services to poor informal traders, whose livelihoods are threatened when the workers organise themselves.

9. 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**. Strong union organisation is capable of encouraging or forcing these organisations to accept their responsibilities for the workers, recognising the union as the legitimate bargaining representative of the workers, and entering meaningful negotiations to improve their working lives.

The most important bargaining counterparts will vary considerably, depending on location, sector, political context etc, but the most common will include:

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 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation 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.

Once the appropriate bargaining counterparts are identified, the principles for collective bargaining for precarious or informal workers are no different from those used throughout the trade union movement – establishing a negotiating forum, gaining recognition from the bargaining counterpart, and establishing procedural agreements.

“FNTT established a national negotiation committee for unions and associations of informal workers. Each province has a committee of five elected members, from which representatives form the national committee. All the provincial committees received training and support from FNTT in techniques around collective bargaining and negotiation, how to identify the workers’ problems and find appropriate solutions. If problems cannot be solved at the provincial level, they can turn to the national committee for help and, if need be, negotiation with national authorities.

“For example, the bicycle taxi union (SYPROTAVEBU), helped by FNTT, was able to negotiate an agreement with the mayor of the capital city Bujumbura, that enabled them to work freely in the city, and bicycle taxis and motorcycle taxis were integrated into the Burundi traffic code.”

**Deogratias Birihanyuma, FNTT,
Burundi**

10. Are we sustainable?

Building a democratic culture of organisation

Building a strong democratic trade union culture requires considerable time and effort, involving investment in long-term workers' education for members, grass-roots activists and union leadership.

Some informal and precarious workers may have been active in trade unions in previous working experience in a more 'formal' organised workplace. They may have a good understanding of the principles and values of the labour movement which will be invaluable to building the union for informal workers.

But for others, prior experience of unions may not have been positive. Perhaps they've believed that unions have shown no interest in informal workers, or have even been hostile or discriminatory towards them. Perhaps they believe that the unions did nothing to help them when they faced redundancy or unfair treatment in the past.

It may be necessary to address some of the most elementary of trade union principles; that workers' rights and livelihoods are best advanced through collective action, rather than through individual struggle and competition between workers.

Transparency and accountability

Ensuring a sense of identity and self-determination for informal and precarious workers within larger broad trade union organisations, within which they may be a minority.

Basic skills in democratic organisation (chairing, recording decisions, keeping accounts, reporting back from negotiations etc), cannot necessarily be taken for granted.

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 why some federations do not demand membership fees from their affiliated organisations. These organisations are wholly dependent on financial support from donor organisations.

Most unions recognise 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 organisation

to function during periods of scarce external funding – albeit perhaps without paid staff or offices.

Dangers of external funding

Many organisations are destroyed by inappropriate levels and conditions of external funding.

In many places, informal transport workers are permanently on the edge of destitution. They are forced to survive on a day-to-day basis, and are very vulnerable to economic crises, hikes in fuel prices, natural disasters etc, or personal shocks such as accidents, mechanical breakdowns, or police harassment.

Access to even relatively small amounts of money can become life changing. A frequent first response to the idea of joining a union can be “what do I get in return?”, often meaning what are the immediate financial gains?

Given that the overwhelming majority of informal workers are poor, it is extremely difficult to run an organisation on membership dues and self-generated income alone. Some of the most basic organisational facilities available to unions and associations of better paid workers, such as offices, computers, and telephones (let alone paid staff), are difficult to afford unless the organisation has access to external finances.

Yet there have been more workers’ organisations destroyed by money than those which have been assisted. Even modest amounts of external funding can create competition and division between leaders, and struggles for control over resources. Money attracts the attention of others, perhaps less honest and scrupulous, individuals and organisations. It can create an enormous strain on the elected leadership to ensure that the money is well managed and is used for the purposes for which it was given.

External finance can also undermine the independence of the organisation. As soon as external support has enabled the organisation to hire staff, rent offices, undertake professional education and organising programmes and so on, there is pressure for that money to continue. 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.

FURTHER READING

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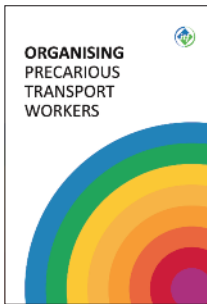
Organising precarious transport workers

Growing numbers of informal and precarious workers are in the world's transport industry.

Many unions organise these workers, and adapt their organising strategies accordingly.

Informal and precarious workers can organise themselves, and unions can be representative of all transport workers.

This booklet can help.



Available in Arabic, English, French, German and Spanish:

www.itfglobal.org/education/precarious.cfm



Available in: Arabic, English, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish:

www.itfglobal.org/education/organising-manual.cfm

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