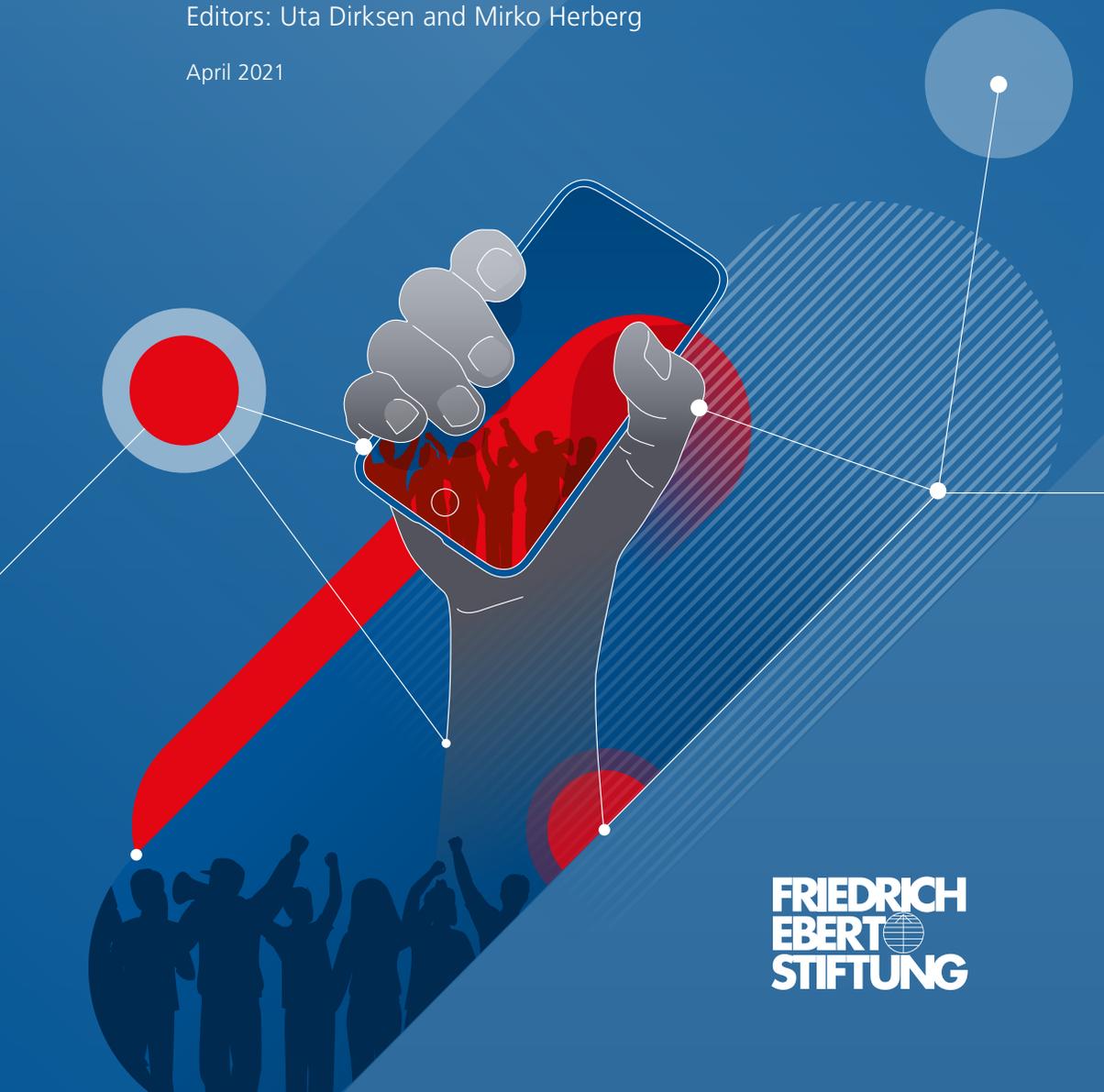


TRADE UNIONS IN TRANSFORMATION 4.0

**Stories of unions confronting
the new world of work**

Editors: Uta Dirksen and Mirko Herberg

April 2021



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Foreword

All across the world, technology transforms workplaces. In the industrial sectors, new manufacturing technologies such as internet of things and cyber-physical systems increase automation and further rationalisation. Service sectors are transformed by the use of apps, digital platforms, big data and artificial intelligence. New powerful transnational digital companies have emerged and begun to shape the global economy, with their “creative destruction” strategies often clawing away at established labour rights.

The new world of digital work is restructuring the power relationship between capital and labour. It has a marked effect on workers’ power to negotiate decent working conditions and puts organised labour on the defensive as the trend towards informalised, precarious and delocalised work has been reinforced.

This seems to suggest that labour power is shrinking. However, as with our previous project “Trade Unions in Transformation”, FES is interested in the strategic response of organised labour. We have thus examined how trade unions and new workers’ organisations build power to confront the new world of work. The articles we present in this booklet identify new approaches and strategies of unions and workers’ organisations.

We thank all authors of the academic case studies for their rigour and willingness to connect empirical research of “work in progress” with our conceptual framework of the Power Resources Approach, and all journalists for capturing the essence of the findings into easily accessible stories. Tamara Gausi of Equal Times coordinated the work with the journalists and thus enabled us to provide you with this condensed version of the researches. Furthermore, we are deeply indebted-

ed to the members of the project's Steering Committee – Victoria Basualdo, Hugo Dias, Carmen Ludwig, Stefan Schmalz, Melisa Serrano, Kurt Vandaele as well as Anja Bodenmüller-Raeder, Thomas Greven, Jannis Grimm, Dominique Klawonn, Marc Meinardus and Bastian Schulz – for their unwavering intellectual guidance and Blanka Balfer and Julia Schultz for the often invisible yet crucial support.

All contributions to the project “Trade Unions in Transformation 4.0” confirm our hypothesis that workers and their unions do have agency and use it. Agency takes on different forms – of action, of strategy, of organisation – and builds on the different power resources (structural, associational, institutional and societal) available to workers.

In established sectors and companies where trade unions have traditionally been organising workers, we observe that such collective strength (associational power) has been used to negotiate the introduction of new technologies and its impacts, mostly taking place in existing dialogue and bargaining arenas.

SECTION 1

TRADE UNION 4.0 SHAPES INDUSTRY 4.0

In **manufacturing**, strong unions have influenced political debates on industrial and investment policy as well as how technological change enters the shopfloor. Our examples from Brazil and Germany show how a combination of institutional power by way of co-determination rights and innovative practices (learning factory to put management and workers to solve joint solutions) have yielded practical solutions at company level. Such on-site innovation has reinforced the understanding that workers carry indispensable knowledge about the labour process and are thus agents of successful change. Transnational solidarity, on the other hand, has contributed to company decisions that favor investment, job protection and the respect of labour rights.

SECTION 2

TRANSFORMING BANKING

In the **banking sector**, a massive loss of employment in the sector worldwide has, counterintuitively maybe, increased the importance of unions. Romanian and Uruguayan banking unions have been able to negotiate collective bargaining provisions on training and re-skilling and introduced innovative means to provide social security by financing a pension fund.





SECTION 3

TECH WORKERS UNIONISE

In the **ICT-sector**, new agency has been “discovered”. Contrary to popular belief, tech workers are receptive to collective interest representation and cooperation with trade unions. The story from Israel tells us that industry restructuring and ensuing insecurity provides an entry point for smart union approaches to provide support and eventually collective bargaining. In other tech companies, connecting issues of identity, discrimination, concern about the environment and the impact of company policies with labour issues have led to the founding of new unions. In the case of YouTube, the company’s discretionary power to impose new rules on compensation of the content creators has provided the spark for self-organisation of YouTubers into a union. A cooperation with a traditional union, IG Metall from Germany, has allowed for a scaling up of the labour conflict and the entering into negotiations.



SECTION 4

RIDERS ON THE STORM

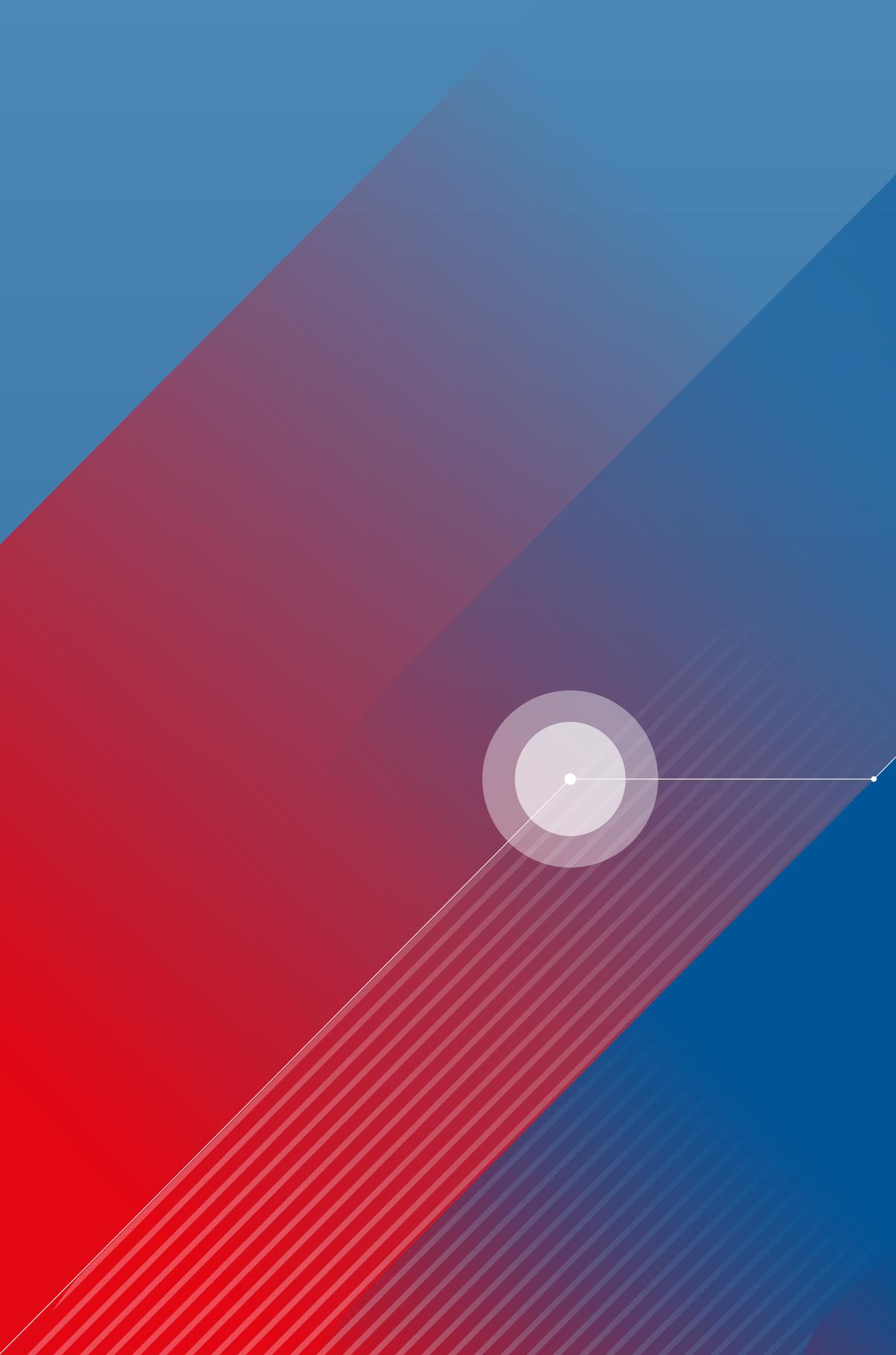
Similarly, the **platform-mediated transport sector** has seen collective labour protests and new types of grass-roots organisations emerge (Argentina, Netherlands/Belgium, Indonesia). These enter into different kinds of cooperation with traditional unions, most often to use unions’ institutional power and to fight for recognition, better regulation and protection. The innovative potential in these new alliances can be witnessed when traditional unions enlarge their repertoire of action and “cross the divide” to integrate the representation of interest of informal, so-called self-employed or precarious workers into their agenda (Uganda, South Korea).

The articles presented here impressively show that organised labour is very much alive, that established arenas are being used to negotiate novel issues and new areas of contestation are being sought to essentially defend or re-claim the dignity of work in an economy that produces new challenges to workers by the day. Innovation, communication and smart strategies – all based on the value of solidarity – are key recipes for workers and unions to rise to these challenges, to face powerful employers and platforms, and to carry the day for workers.

Our role as FES is to highlight innovation, provide inspiration, create space for dialogue and to jointly develop new strategies in our national, regional and global trade union cooperation. If that is what you are looking for – Bring it on!

Uta Dirksen and Mirko Herberg

April 2021



SECTION 1

TRADE UNION 4.0 SHAPES INDUSTRY 4.0



1.1

In Germany, workers are taking the reins of digital transformation

An innovative project initiated by the country's largest union, IG Metall, is showing how labour's proactive participation in the changing workplace can turn digitalisation and globalisation from threats into opportunities.

By Jennifer Hattam¹

Digitalisation and globalisation are creating massive upheavals in the world of work, transforming job tasks, workplace culture and the ways in which companies are organised. These changes often pose a threat to workers, by making their jobs redundant or moving them overseas. But by proactively engaging in such transformations, Germany's IG Metall is showing that innovation processes can be managed in a way that benefits workers and employers alike.

“Getting workers to participate in all the processes involved in shaping the future of work is essential to protecting their rights and ensuring decent working and living conditions,” says Jochen Schroth of IG Metall, Germany's largest single union, with 2.2 million members.

Schroth and co-author Kathrin Schaefers detailed this approach in a report, [Shaping Industry 4.0 on Workers' Terms – IG Metall's »Work+Innovation« Project](#), published in September 2020 by the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

¹ Jennifer Hattam is a freelance journalist based in Istanbul, Turkey.

Initiated by IG Metall in 2016, the Work+Innovation (W+I) project engaged workers at more than 100 plants and companies across Germany – including multinationals such as Airbus, Bosch, Siemens and Volkswagen – in a process that involved both opportunities for improving their qualifications and for re-envisioning their own workplaces.

According to the report, IG Metall First Chairman Jörg Hofmann and others at the union realised that “the possibilities provided by digitalisation could only be seized if the opportunities offered by shop floor and collective bargaining policy were consistently used, pointing out alternatives, making recommendations for action and involving the workforce in these processes at the earliest possible stage.”

To this end, the W+I project was conceived with a dual-track approach, combining worker training programmes with company-specific innovation projects. The courses were designed to prepare workers for the digitalisation of industry, which is known as ‘Industry 4.0’. Though the content of these courses varied depending on the individual needs of the works councils taking part, the main topics covered include technological changes at companies, innovation policy, employee participation and a three-day module in a ‘learning factory’ at Ruhr University Bochum.

“In learning factories, problem- and action-oriented learning can be enabled in a realistic factory environment,” Schaefers and Schroth write in their report. “The special feature of the Bochumer Lernfabrik [Bochum Learning Factory] was and continues to be that

In this September 2018 photograph, members of the Airbus General Works Council take a tour of the company’s production line in Hamburg, where the A320 is manufactured.

Thomas Range/IG Metall



it does not focus on technology alone, but above all on its effects on people. Thanks to this seminar module, it was therefore possible for the participants to jointly understand the opportunities and risks of technical-organisational changes on the basis of real production processes, to experience the associated consequences for working conditions first-hand and to develop alternatives for shaping them.”

In parallel to the qualification courses, the W+I project developed and supervised individual transformation projects on a company level, addressing issues such as working time and organisation; implementing new technologies in the production line in a manner favourable to the workforce; and establishing necessary programmes for further education.

TAPPING THE EXPERTISE OF EMPLOYEES

One W+I success story came from a Siemens plant in Tübingen that manufactures geared motors. After management announced in 2017 that assembly would be relocated to the Czech Republic, the plant’s well-organised workforce generated 80 concrete proposals for reducing costs by several million euros using digital technology in order to maintain the Tübingen site.

“You need good ideas, but also a strong union to get the respect you need to negotiate on the same level as the employer,” Schroth says. The mobilisation of this associational power at Siemens persuaded the initially sceptical management to participate in W+I.

“The employees for the qualification series were selected and a company project group was set up, followed by extensive negotiations with the help of IG Metall,” Schaefers and Schroth write. “Finally, a series of digital applications were agreed upon [...]. For example, a screen in the production hall now shows in real time what the capacity utilisation and availability of the individual machines is.”

The digital applications generated by the workforce “not only prevented the closure of the site, but also helped to ensure that the plant could continue to operate,” the report explains, adding that “Siemens Tübingen is now a digital showpiece within the Siemens group”. The increased productivity meant that the plant could become profitable again, and by keeping it in Tübingen, hundreds of jobs were saved.

“This example shows how our workers on the shop floor are the real experts on questions of improving the production system,” says

Schroth. "The process took more than one-and-a-half years, but at the end of it, everyone was on the winning side."

According to a survey carried out by IG Metall in 2019 of works councils and shop stewards from almost 2,000 companies in all unionised sectors, transformation strategies were "virtually or completely absent" at more than half of the plants represented. This creates an opportunity for worker-led solutions to a variety of challenges.

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

When Airbus Operations GmbH established engineering centres in the United States and India, the time difference between its locations created a demand for round-the-clock support, exposing engineers at the Airbus site in Hamburg to permanent on-call duty and the associated increased strain.

As part of the W+I project, employees developed a voluntary and self-organised system of scheduling weekend shifts, with a backup system of defined criteria for a supervisor to use to determine staffing when a particular shift is not selected by enough workers. The model also provides supplemental pay for weekend work and allows for the option of working from home on public holidays.

"Following a pilot phase and a subsequent evaluation, a company agreement on this working time model was finally reached which led to better planning and greater acceptance," according to Schaefers and Schroth. "During the process, the employers' side also learned that work organisation and job satisfaction must be considered hand in hand."

Implementation of the W+I project was facilitated by Germany's Works Constitution Act, which legally enshrines opportunities for co-determination, as well as by support from the country's Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which co-financed the project along with the European Social Fund.

"The fact that the Labour Ministry understands that the discussion about the future of work shouldn't just focus on technology, but more on people, played a crucial role before A+I even started," says Schaefers. "The ministry knew we could find answers to that challenge because we are so close to the plant level. With more than 100 W+I projects, we can now provide evidence that it works in real life."

The W+I project concluded in 2019 but this summer, IG Metall launched a follow-up initiative to create toolkits for different aspects

of shaping the transformation process – such as checklists and seminar concepts – that can be adapted by works councils as well as full-time unionists to use in ways specific to the needs of their individual workplaces.

“We cannot stop the changes in the workplace – they are coming and the transformation is already in full force,” says Schaefers. What initiatives like W+I can do is ensure that not only are workers not left behind by that transformation, but that they play an essential role in leading it.

FULL CASE STUDY



Shaping Industry 4.0 on Workers' Terms IG Metall's »Work+Innovation« Project

AUTHORS Kathrin Schäfers, Jochen Schroth

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16815&ty=pdf

1.2

Adapting to Industry 4.0

A new challenge for Brazil's autoworker unions

Brazil's history has helped its trade unions to prepare for the challenges of digitalisation and the future of work.

By Mathilde Dorcadie¹

Trade unionism in Brazil shares a long, common history with the automotive industry, particularly in the so-called ABC region of Greater São Paulo, named after the towns of Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo and São Caetano, which together are home to hundreds of manufacturing plants. It was here, in 1983, that the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (Unified Workers' Central, or CUT) was born, now the country's largest and most powerful workers organisation with nearly eight million members and 3,960 affiliates. The ABC region is also the birthplace of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party, or PT); it is home to the *Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC* (the ABC Metalworkers' Union, or SMABC), one of the most important trade unions in Brazil with a history of leading some of the country's biggest strikes; and it was also here that the former Brazilian president Lula da Silva earned his stripes in his first role as union leader (as the president of SMABC). The ABC region remains a stronghold of Brazilian trade unionism, but with the global automotive manufacturing sector undergoing profound changes in recent years, it is also a re-

¹ Mathilde Dorcadie is editor of the French version of Equal Times. For several years she worked as a correspondent for French-language media in Brazil and the Middle East. As a freelance journalist, she worked for Agence France Presse as well as various television channels, magazines and newspapers.



Mercedes-Benz workers in São Bernardo do Campo hold a rally to demand job protection, following the general assembly of the metalworkers' union, SMABC, on 17 August 2016. The sign reads: "Against Unemployment".

Adonis Guerra/SMABC

ian automobile sector. Contributing to Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's "Trade Unions in Transformation 4.0" project, it examines the role of trade unions in the current economic and political context of Brazil, which has seen over two decades of deindustrialisation, where the 2017 reform of the Labour Code (Law 13.467/2017) by the former government of Michel Temer weakened trade unions and collective bargaining by atomising the labour force, and where the political will to implement ambitious industrial projects that meet the challenges of the digital age is severely lacking. According to Araujo, Temer's decision to freeze public spending for 20 years, which targeted education in particular, puts Brazil "at odds with the international movement to promote the education and training of the labour force as a catalyst in the race for competitiveness".

Araujo says that trade unions can play an important role in helping the sector adjust to the current challenges as they have already demonstrated their ability to adapt and mobilise during previous periods of Brazil's history, which transformed them beyond their traditional role as workers' organisations and into actors for social and political change. In addition to the fight for workers' rights, Brazil's trade union movement has historically been strengthened by broader political struggles such as the 're-democratisation' process that be-

gion where the impact of digital transformation on organised labour deserves a closer look.

Ariella Silva Araujo, a social sciences PhD candidate at the University of Campinas, recently explored this topic in her research paper Deploying Historical Strength to Shape the Future – SMABC and Industry 4.0 in the Brazil-

gan in the early 1980s. During this period of political evolution, SMA-BC developed significant internal infrastructure allowing it to offer many resources for workers, including legal services, training for political organising and professional skills, and a studies and statistics department.

According to Araujo, because of the impact of the increasingly neo-liberal policies of several governments during this period, as well as high inflation and mass job losses, the movement was forced to modernise its activities over the following decades. As a result, it learned to prioritise close negotiation with corporate management and governments, and to participate in multilateral discussions concerning investments and strategic planning with the primary goal of protecting jobs. During this period, SMABC also benefitted from international cooperation, particularly with the company unions of German automobile manufacturers Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz. Joint cooperation with their European trade union counterparts led, for example, to the enhancement of *Comitês Mundiais de Trabalhadores* (Global Worker Committees, or CMTs), which had existed since the 1950s and were one of the main tools used for collective bargaining inside multinationals, and would later inspire the creation of similar committees at the national level designed to coordinate between regional and national union leadership. In the 2000s, the trade union movement played once again a key role in the landmark, pro-worker, pro-poor policies instituted during the 'Lula Years' while the PT was in power: the introduction of a minimum wage over the rate of inflation, the rapid expansion of formal work, and improved social benefits in collective agreements, are just a few examples.

TRADE UNIONISM 4.0

Over the course of its history, SMABC accumulated considerable societal, associational and institutional power, and acquired resources and skills that Araujo believes can be used to develop 'trade unionism 4.0', a series of solutions to be implemented in response to the challenge of transitioning to a cutting-edge automotive sector in terms of both technology and quality employment.

Firstly, the report shows the way in which SMABC continues to mobilise effectively, despite the adversities currently facing the automotive sector in a context of deindustrialisation and the resultant job losses. For instance, she points to SMABC's participation in the joint development of a high-tech industrial plan (Plano Industria 10+). This ambitious proposal was made in 2018, and demanded concrete action from the government for a better quality of life, the reduction of inequalities, and the redistribution of resources in a way that will

produce real economic and social development in Brazil over the next decade. It calls for an “innovative industrial sector” that re-establishes Brazil’s previously high ranking for manufacturing output amongst industrialised nations. It presents the ways in which technological advancement could have a positive impact on the economy, jobs, and people’s well-being while ensuring the protection of the environment. This example shows the ways in which the trade union movement is using its institutional power. We can also see that to strengthen the industrial sector as a whole, the creation of broad collectives (comprising unions, academics and other experts) called *Coletivo de Políticas Industriais* played an important contribution.

Along with these large-scale efforts, unions are also working locally and sectorially to ensure the future of jobs as well as the future of trade unions. Ever since the 2017 Labour Code reform, which turned the mandated fee every employee had to pay to finance trade unions into a voluntary contribution thus greatly weakening the labour movement, there has been an ongoing reorganisation of trade unions in the ABC region by macro-sector in order to increase the capacity for mobilisation. SMABC had been one of the few unions that successfully signed collective agreements in 2018-2019 aimed at countering the negative effects of the reforms. SMABC was able to do this because it still has significant power, but this power will not last long if the movement fails to make structural changes. Opening the union to new categories of workers – such as white-collar workers, outsourced workers, young workers and women – is an area in which there is much work to do. With the elimination of jobs leading to a drop-in union membership, the survival of trade unions will continue to be in question without a significant uptake of new members.

In addition, long-established transnational cooperation should be better utilised, according to the report. The CMTs are still there to ensure the valuable sharing of experiences and solutions for the future: for instance, the collaboration with Germany’s IG Metall trade union in the development of a factory for ultra-connected Mercedes truck cabins was a successful example of an obsolete assembly line transformed into a high-tech assembly line thanks to an important investment obtained after collective bargaining and international negotiations, that saved jobs. There is still much work to be done and the challenges are significant but reflecting on experience and the continuous analysis of trends are the best tools for moving toward a just transition.

FULL CASE STUDY



**Deploying Historical Strength to Shape
the Future**

SMABC and Industry 4.0 in the Brazilian
automobile sector

AUTHOR Ariella Silva Araujo

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16816&ty=pdf



SECTION 2

TRANSFORMING BANKING



2.1

In Uruguay, training and strategic thinking is safeguarding employment in the banking sector

The Uruguayan banking sector union AEBU has responded to technological advances and their negative impact on employment by focusing on training for the sector's workers. With fewer employees and lower paid jobs, the trade union has had to take a proactive approach to defend the rights of banking workers.

By Luis Curbelo¹

The financial sector has a long history of adopting new technologies. While the pace of change in information and communication technologies (ICT) has accelerated in recent years, the sector had already indicated the direction it was taking during the 1990s – when the first ATMs and self-service machines, available 24 hours a day, started to appear.

It was also around this time that financial institutions were introducing the 'executives' that could manage entire financial or banking product processes from start to finish via a computer terminal. This meant a radical change in the financial system's production chain, according to the AEBU, the only union representing workers and retired employees from every area of the private and public financial sector. The companies in the sector took advantage of these techno-

¹ A Uruguayan journalist with 35 years of experience in the written press, radio and television, Luis Curbelo is currently the Press, Communications and International Relations Secretary for the Uruguayan press association APU.

logical advances to gradually reduce both their workforce and their labour costs.

FROM THE INTERNET TO CELLULAR TECHNOLOGY

The AEBU's general secretary, Fernando Gambera, tells Equal Times about the impact of the emergence of the internet on the workforce and the infinite possibilities it opened up within the financial system, at the expense of jobs in the sector, a conclusion also reached by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) study, [Banking on Training and Pensions – How a Uruguayan union negotiates automation in the financial sector](#), by Lucía Pittaluga, Soledad Giudice, Aníbal Peluffo and Natalia Otero, with the collaboration of Agustín Correa and Federico Lacaño, published in September.

The process accelerated exponentially with the advance of mobile phone technology, which meant that users no longer needed to come into physical contact with a financial institution: "The mobile phone allows you to connect with the financial system and carry out all the transactions you need without ever coming into contact with an employee," says Gambera.

These technological changes, which have brought new business opportunities and a wealth of services to the traditional financial sector, have been implemented in Uruguay at almost the same pace as in more developed economies, thanks to the country's excellent telecommunications infrastructure.

The presence of international financial institutions has contributed to speeding up these changes, in line with the executive guidelines issued by the parent companies, although the main bank on the national financial scene, the state-owned Banco de la República, which has over 50 per cent of the market, is by no means lagging behind when it comes to incorporating new technology.

In 2002, when Uruguay was hit by a severe financial, economic and social crisis, the private sector of the financial system began a major process of [restructuring and concentration](#) that is continuing to this day.

The replacement of jobs by technology has directly impacted the number of members the AEBU (a union founded in 1942) now has in the traditional banking sector. This decline has, however, been compensated for in recent decades by the union's intensive drive to recruit workers from companies that provide services linked to the financial system, such as credit unions, finance companies, insurance



Banking sector workers at a demonstration called by AEBU in Montevideo rally to defend pay and working conditions. In recent decades, rapid technological advances have meant that the AEBU banking union has had to adapt to a new environment: fewer employees, lower membership, outsourcing of services and new jobs with lower wages.

Ricardo Antúnez/Adhoc Fotos

companies, money transporters, credit card firms, saving circles and ATM businesses.

The banking union still has a membership of about 12,000, including workers from the public and private sectors, but this is thanks to its organising work with new players in the financial system.

According to AEBU figures, union membership in the private financial sector is around 50 per cent of the total (some 6,000 workers). Although the membership rate is very high, only 40 per cent corresponds to what is considered 'pure banking'. The remaining 60 per cent of these 6,000 workers are spread over other companies linked to the system, such as card issuers and credit managers, businesses which are mostly owned by the private banks themselves.

AEBU'S PROACTIVE APPROACH

As the FES study highlights: "AEBU identified the risks of automation early on and centred its approach on safeguarding employment rather than specific posts, with a strong commitment to worker training and the negotiated management of the changes with the employers. AEBU has maintained the historical features of its work: pragmatism, flexibility, research, and the willingness to look ahead and identify strategies for adapting to change while protecting current employ-

ees,” underlines the publication. The reports also reveal that the union is currently working on a more comprehensive study into the effects of technology, the risks of automation, the intensity of the tasks and the identification of the skills and knowledge required.

As Gambera points out, the union realised that it could not stop the advance of technology or directly oppose it: “We made a collective decision to be proactive, focusing not only on training workers in the use of technological tools but also on basic training, especially within the ancillary firms where many workers have not completed their secondary education.”

The focus on employment rather than on specific jobs, together with social dialogue in the management of change, has been fundamental to the trade union’s approach, as has the inclusion of the gender perspective in all its negotiations. Most of the new jobs in the non-traditional services are held by women workers, according to the study conducted by Lucía Pittaluga and the Technical Advisory Committee of the Uruguayan Banking Association.

Despite the loss of so-called ‘traditional’ jobs in the sector, other openings have been created in what are called ‘channels’ for generating financial products, such as application support and maintenance. The reduction in the number of people working in banks has also been ‘compensated’ for by the rise in demand for lower skilled and thus lower paid labour in related firms, which has obliged union organisers to exercise more creativity in their efforts to convince such workers to join the union.

Gambera underlines that these new circumstances have an inevitable impact on the sector’s pension system. AEBU began working over a decade ago to minimise the reduction in contributions to the sector’s pension fund, the Caja de Jubilaciones y Pensiones Bancarias. In 2008, when the pension fund was technically bankrupt, AEBU put forward a number of proposals – which seemed unthinkable at first, controversial even – such as reducing the replacement rate, increasing the retirement age and even a vote to approve an extraordinary capital contribution.

During the same negotiations, AEBU also managed to get companies to start paying a tax on the technological assets they introduce into the financial system. “In a nutshell, we managed to get companies to contribute to the pension fund every time they introduce a new ATM, as if it were a person,” says Gambera.

THE PANDEMIC AND AS YET UNREGULATED TELEWORK

The challenges experienced over recent years have been compounded by the health emergency caused by the coronavirus in 2020. The technology investments that companies have made have enabled them to keep running their business operations via telework during the pandemic.

AEBU decided to relax its position regarding trade union demands during the health emergency, to prevent job losses.

The union has nonetheless already made it clear to companies that it wants to negotiate the new working conditions arising from the pandemic, especially telework, which – in many respects – is here to stay, in a country with no laws that regulate it.

Other factors to be considered in forthcoming negotiations include safety issues, workers' stress levels and the additional costs they are having to shoulder, to use the internet, for example. In spite of the difficulties, the union feels that the Uruguayan financial system is stable, with solid finances in both banking and other financial services in the sector and that it will undoubtedly play a key role in the country's vital economic recovery.

FULL CASE STUDY



Banking on Training and Pensions

How a Uruguayan union negotiates automation in the financial sector

AUTHORS Lucía Pittaluga, Soledad Giudice, Aníbal Peluffo and Natalia Otero. With the collaboration of Agustín Correa and Federico Lacaño

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16585&ty=pdf

2.2

What does digital transformation and automation mean for the future of work in Romania's banking sector?

Digital transformation, automation and other technological innovations have not only resulted in process optimisation in the banking sector, but job losses, job insecurity and new challenges for trade unions as well.

By Razvan Papasima¹

The transformation of the Romanian banking sector over the last decade has led to a great paradox within the industry – as well as a rare trade union triumph. While transactions and lending activities have increased year-on-year, the number of employees working in the sector has declined drastically. According to a September 2020 study published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, [Back to Bargaining in Banking. How Digitalisation Plays Romanian Trade Unions an Upper Hand](#) by Ștefan Guga and Marcel Spatari, between 2008 and 2018 the Romanian banking sector lost no less than a quarter of its employees, the largest loss in Europe, with some 40 per cent of bank branches closing.

This double movement has been triggered by the proliferation of technological innovation, based on process acceleration and automation, which have taken over some of the work of traditional employees in the banking sector. Geared towards work efficiency and cost reduction, banks have started to reduce their physical presence in

¹ Razvan Papasima is a Bucharest-based researcher and freelance journalist. He writes articles and essays on the complex relationship between the economy, politics, culture and technology, with a particular focus on privatisation, migration and financialisation in Romania.

Romania's cities and towns, especially over the last two years, by closing branches and laying off staff, while expanding into fintech and increasing their virtual activities through the digitalisation of banking services.

In the face of these transformations, the role of trade unions in the banking system has become increasingly vital. An example of their bargaining power is demonstrated by the fact that Romania's banking unions were able to successfully negotiate and conclude an industry-wide collective bargaining agreement in 2018 – one of the few multi-employer agreements signed in the private sector in the aftermath of the 2008 recession.

As Kurt Vandaele, a researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) says, "major legal changes in 2009 and 2011...resulted in a decentralisation of the collective bargaining system and a significant decline in collective bargaining coverage (from almost 98 per cent in 2010 to 35 per cent later on). Moreover, collective bargaining at the company level is hampered due to legal provisions affecting union recognition and representativeness criteria".

In this context, he says it is "fairly remarkable" that the Federation of Insurance and Banking Trade Unions (FSAB, which represents five insurance trade unions and five banking unions) joined forces with the Employers' Association in the Financial Service Sector to sign a two-year multi-employer collective bargaining agreement (CBA) covering several of the country's largest banks and approximately one-third of bank employees. In a country where union

Members of the FSAB trade union rally in Victory Square, Bucharest in October 2017 to protest the government's decision to transfer the payroll from employers to employees.

Sandica Stănescu



density has fallen from an estimated 80.2 per cent in 1991 to 18.9 per cent in 2018, this CBA has shored up workers' rights with respect to managing collective and individual redundancies, ensuring internal mobility and telework, as well as providing workers with professional training.

RESTRUCTURING, RETRAINING AND REDEPLOYMENT

However, the issue now is implementation. FSAB president Constantin Paraschiv says that while he recognises the unstoppable force of digitalisation, union efforts are currently geared towards protecting the most vulnerable categories of employees, such as female workers (who are over-represented in the kind of customer-facing roles that are hit hardest by digitalisation), those over the age of 50 who have little chance of re-employment, or workers with children. "Only one company managed to find solutions to keep its staff, even when it reduced its number of branches. In all other companies, restructuring has been directly proportional to the reduction of branches," he says.

Paraschiv highlights the case of BRD-Groupe Société Générale, Romania's third largest bank, where measures are currently being undertaken to restructure and reduce staff. Cristian Mocanu, who heads the IMPACT Trade Union within BRD-Groupe Société Générale, one of the five FSAB affiliates, says: "The Covid crisis has contributed to the acceleration of digitalisation processes, and consequently to restructuring, although staff reductions have been taking place constantly in recent years."

But the way in which these restructurings impact employees sometimes has little correlation to their skills or training. As Paraschiv states: "When a branch closes, all staff are left without a place to work, from the manager to the cashier." In order to address this problem, Paraschiv is calling for the relocation of workers to other branches, particularly for older workers, whose future job prospects are hit hardest by digitalisation. It is precisely for this reason that the FSAB have negotiated, in some cases, the payment of compensatory wages for older workers until they can start claiming their pensions.

The FSAB is also calling for investment in training, education and re-skilling so that workers facing redundancy can be retrained and redeployed. And it is on this point that the unions have significant leverage. One of the main drivers for the landmark 2018 CBA was the fact that employers recognised the urgent need to bring some stability to banking, a sector hit hard by widespread labour shortages and high staff turnover. One solution is investing in training and education. The FSAB even managed to negotiate an additional agreement "stip-

ulating extensive obligations on the part of the management to provide training to employees,” according to the FES report. One example of this is the free online training platform that has been supported by Romania’s banks since last year. But more needs to be done, says Paraschiv.

Younger workers seem to be less affected by the restructuring of the banking sector, says the FSAB leader. They receive an average of seven to eight months’ full salary, according to the collective agreement negotiated by the union, and this allows them to support themselves while they look for new work. But the departure of young people has a perverse effect on the banking sector, because a large number of them end up being employed by IT companies that provide digital transformation and automation services – companies that offer various opportunities for professional retraining in a wide range of jobs, from programming to the sale of fintech products, thus contributing to the growth of the very processes that left them without banking jobs in the first place. Moreover, for the implementation of fintech services, some companies either completely outsource services or resort to the use of contract workers.

“Digitalisation is a necessary evil,” concludes Paraschiv, who admits that he expects massive restructurings throughout the sector in the fourth quarter of the year. “We are the only trade union in Romania, in the private sector, which has a collective labour contract at the level of a group of units. We still represent something important to the workers,” concludes the FSAB leader apprehensively.

FULL CASE STUDY



Back to Bargaining in Banking

How digitalisation plays Romanian trade unions an upper hand

AUTHORS Ştefan Guga and Marcel Spatari

LINK www.fes.de/cgj-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16580&ty=pdf



SECTION 3

TECH WORKERS UNIONISE



3.1

Israel's "Unlikely Unionists"

Organising white collar workers in the ICT sector

Histradut's efforts to organise tech workers shows that even highly-skilled, well-paid, in-demand workers cannot avoid the impact of digital disruption – and that even the most unlikely groups of workers can be unionised.

By Joel Schalit¹

These days, Israel is world-renowned for its information and communications technology (ICT) sector. Not just any technology, but mobile applications – such as Google's ubiquitous navigation tool Waze, and the popular messaging app Viber – as well as fintech and security software. It never used to be that way. Until the early 2000s, the only industries Israel was associated with were agriculture, defense and diamond cutting.

Heavy state investment in the defence and security industries laid the foundations for breakthroughs in the civilian ICT sector. Israel Defence Forces famed signal intelligence arm, Unit 8200, in particular, is credited with incubating the high-tech explosion.

Today, more Israeli companies are listed on the NASDAQ than any other European country, and nearly all of them are technology ventures. Their predominance reflects the economic importance attached to the tech sector by the government: Israel spends approxi-

¹ Joel Schalit is an Israeli journalist based in Berlin. He is the editor of [The Battleground](#) and author of [Israel vs Utopia](#) (Akashic).

mately 4 per cent of its GDP on R&D (research and development); by comparison, the U.S. spent just 2.83 per cent of GDP on R&D in 2017. This level of state investment places it at the top of all OECD countries.

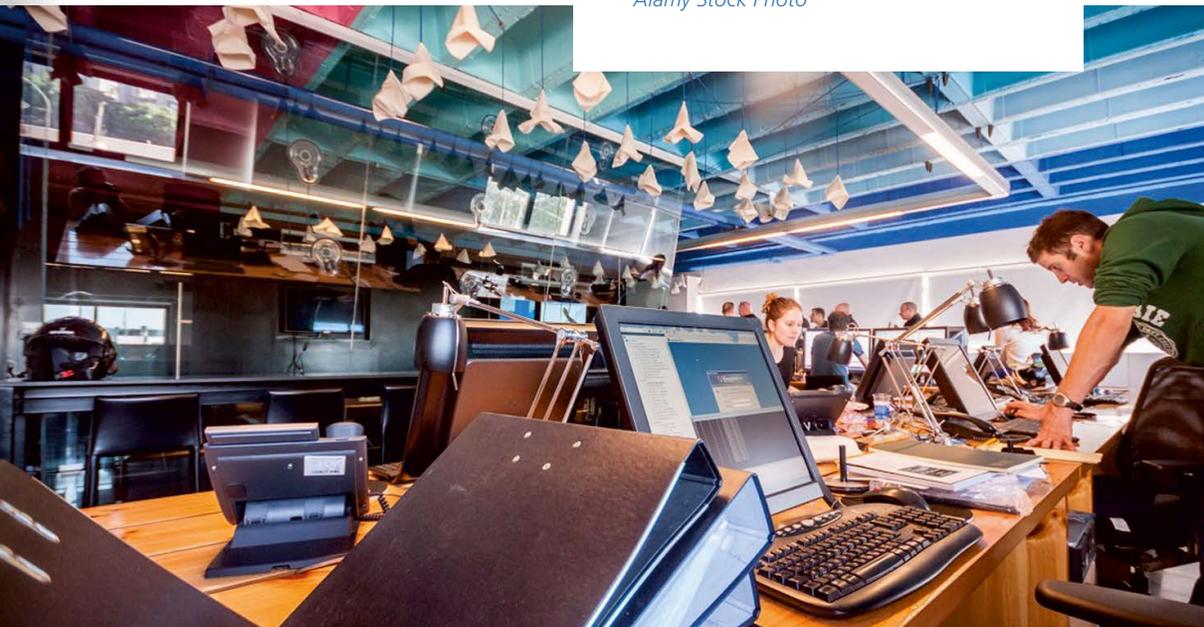
In 2019, 307,000 workers were employed by tech firms, or 9.2 per cent of all Israeli workers, as Ben Fisher explains in his report, Unlikely Unionists – Organised labour in the Israeli ICT sector, for Germany's Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). It was a perfect opportunity for Israel's once-dominant Histadrut union to take the lead; in the wake of the 2011 social justice protests against the high cost of living and calling for better wages, Histadrut forged a plan to organise technology workers by founding the Cellular, Internet and High-Tech Workers Union (CIHT).

According to Fisher, Histadrut's 2014 decision to create the CIHT was controversial, as the union had historically been focused on organising public, not private, sector workers. Not only that: Israel's trade unions had, like other developed economies, faced years of declining membership – as many as 80 per cent of Israeli workers were members of a trade union in the late 1970s, by 2012, according to Fisher's report, union density stood at just 23 per cent. In addition, unions were alien to Israeli high-tech's labour culture.

"You're facing workers who think organised labour is something archaic, something that hinders the economy, something corrupt," he says. Like tech sector workers in other Western countries, many of Israel's ICT workers enjoy high salaries and decent benefits. In 2017, the average salary for a software developer was 26,644 Israel Shekels (approximately

In 2019, 307,000 workers in Israel were employed by tech firms, or 9.2 per cent of all workers in the country.

Yagil Henkin / Images of Israel / Alamy Stock Photo



€6,150), more than 2.5 times the average salary in Israel. “They belong to a new labour market, with a libertarian ethos,” Fisher adds. “When we talk about unions, people in the tech sector think of socialism. They think unions are bad for the economy.”

But given the growing number of Israelis employed by the tech sector, the CIHT was the right idea at the right time. The ground for its creation was laid in three parts: firstly, through the introduction in 2009 of labour law amendments which forced companies to negotiate with their workers regarding collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) whenever work councils were founded. Then with the establishment, in 2010, of a new Histadrut department focused solely on organising new workplaces and workers, particularly in the private sector. This was followed by the success of Histadrut campaigns in the year prior to CIHT’s formation to unionise workers at mobile carriers such as Bezeq and Pelephone.

Given the typical neoliberal labour issues of the tech industry, such as “untraditional employment relations,” poor job security, project-based contracts and high levels of migration between companies, there was an obvious need for labour organising – even highly-skilled, well-paid, in-demand workers cannot avoid the impact of digital disruption. Following a wave of mass dismissals, the offshoring of jobs and increased job insecurity, workers at several ICT firms approached Histadrut about forming works councils in their workplaces.

BUILDING WORKERS’ POWER BY CHANGING LEGISLATION AND REVITALISING ORGANISING APPROACHES

So how did Histadrut go about building workers’ power in the ICT sector? As a first step, the union built and utilised institutional power by promoting successful legislative campaigns that made it possible for tech workers to organise in their sector. In Israel, workers are represented in the workplace through works councils that are affiliated to sectoral unions, which have a mandate to negotiate with employers collectively. “The strategy of the Histadrut was to take the four, five or six biggest employers and get them [to agree to collective bargaining agreements],” Fisher explains. “Once you’ve got them on board, you can go to the Ministry of Economy with the employers and ask them to extend whatever agreements you’ve reached to other workers.”

These efforts had corresponding benefits for Histadrut, insofar as it had found a way to integrate high-tech labour advocacy in its repertoire and make the union more receptive to the needs of the digital

economy. The results of this new and reinvigorated power have been positive for Israel's national labour centre. Fisher writes: "Between 2010 and 2017, some 100,000 new members [from all sectors, not just ICT] joined the Histadrut, after establishing a work council in their workplaces. By 2016, union density grew to 27.1 per cent - meaning a 17 per cent increase in membership since 2012."

With just several thousand members in an industry of more than 300,000 workers, the CIHT effort has had mixed results. At a workplace level, of the six worker groups that led unionising efforts in their ICT companies between 2014 and 2016, five managed to form a work council, three successfully negotiated CBAs, while two won some improvements for workers after work disruptions. But looking at the bigger picture, CIHT's success discredits industry warnings that unionising efforts would lead to even more job losses in the sector as ICT companies would relocate abroad in search of cheaper labour:

"When a work council was founded, employer's discretion was somehow restrained; dismissals were postponed or cancelled, workers gained prolonged due notice periods and better compensation plans upon dismissal, and were sometimes offered voluntary retirement schemes," Fisher's report states. The CIHT experience provides a successful template for other sectoral unionisation drives, particularly in sectors with very low union membership rates. Given the Netanyahu government's ongoing privatisation roll-out, the inspiration and strategies provided by such examples are of key importance to the Israel union movement.

FULL CASE STUDY



Unlikely Unionist

Organised labour in the Israeli ICT sector

AUTHOR Ben Fisher

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16631&ty=pdf

3.2

YouTubers of the world, unite!

What happens when a grassroots,
international creators' movement
and a traditional trade union
join forces?

Thanks to the efforts of the YouTubers Union and IG Metall, content creators on the platform now have greater transparency, arbitration power, clearer rules, better communication and greater participation.

By Jelena Prtorić¹

Jörg Sprave built his first slingshot at the age of six but didn't think of pursuing his hobby further until almost 40 years later. At that time Sprave, who holds a degree in economics, worked for a video editing software company. As they needed video content to test YouTube uploads, Sprave decided to film himself making slingshots.

Five years later, in 2013, Sprave decided to become a full-time, professional YouTuber. On [the Slingshot Channel](#), he has been publishing tutorials in English and reviews about self-made slingshots, cross-bows, knives and airguns. His account has amassed over 433 million views and is followed by more than 2.6 million people.

Back in 2012, when YouTube opened its Partner Program to everybody, content creators could easily monetise their videos, provided they had enough views and avoided controversial (sexual or violent) content and language. But in 2017, a series of scandals shook the platform when some advertisements were played alongside videos [promoting extremism and hate speech](#). Several major companies

¹ Jelena Prtorić is a journalist reporting from South-Eastern Europe on politics, human rights, culture and the environment.

pulled their ads and a total revenue loss of US\$750 million was predicted for YouTube.

The scandal and drop in revenues pushed YouTube to review its algorithms, but this had a negative impact on creators' content and revenues. Many professional YouTubers saw their videos demonetised, shadowbanned (blocking or partially blocking a user or their content in a way that is not obvious to the user) or their channels (temporarily) closed, thus putting many in a financially precarious position.

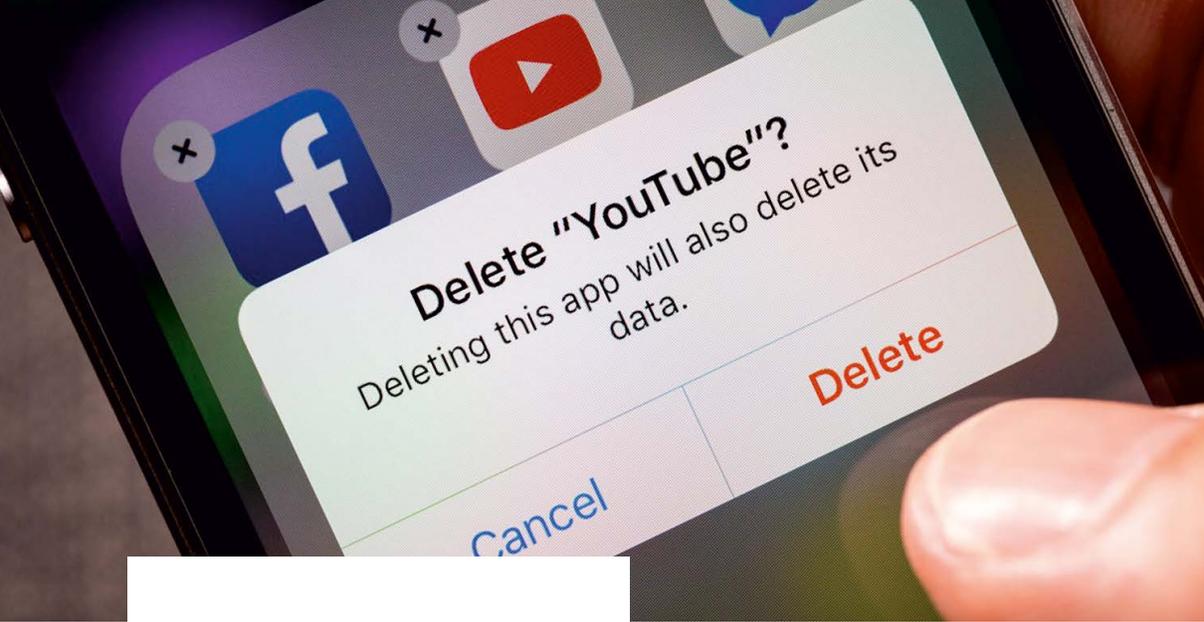
Sprave was one of them. He says the problem was not the algorithm change per se, but the fact that the process and new guidelines weren't clearly communicated to creators. Although YouTube was his main source of income, he had other means to make a living, but he felt it was his duty to fight back. In March 2018, he created the YouTubers Union (YTU) in order to facilitate the exchange of information among creators, organise support campaigns and discuss changes on the platform.

UNITY AND VISIBILITY

Workers organising on large-scale digital platforms is still relatively uncommon and is fraught with challenges, notes the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung report Organising YouTube – A novel case of platform worker organising by Valentin Niebler and Annemarie Kern. One of them is organisational fragmentation. Since workers are not formally integrated into the organisation they “lack rights to collectively bargain or organize.” They also “face technological fragmentation, entangled with high information asymmetries that prevent them from communicating with each other,” and are confronted with geographical separation, since they live and work in different areas of the world and are subject to different legislation.

But Sprave says there is another challenge: ideological differences. “The group gathers people of different political beliefs. We have right-wing and left-wing channels and everything in between.” Sprave made it clear that the union wasn't set up to discuss political and ideological differences. “Our goal was to enhance the working conditions of YouTubers. We said we were completely neutral regarding the content – as long as one's channel follows the platforms' guidelines.” This means that the union didn't support the demands of those who wanted YouTube to allow the airing of videos that promote hate speech and conspiracy theories.

Sprave also makes it clear that he never wanted to “kill YouTube and start another platform” nor demand that content creators become



In 2018, YouTube content creator Jörg Sprave formed the YouTubers Union after changes in the algorithm negatively impacted the video rankings and incomes of YouTubers. Following a popular campaign, the union manage to negotiate more rights and better conditions for content creators.

True Images/Alamy Stock Photo

YouTube’s employees. “We just wanted a fair partnership,” he says.

YTU was initially set up as a [Facebook group](#) which allowed Sprave not only to share timely updates but also create polls that could be used as a tool in group decision-making. However, there is still a hierarchy in the group, and Sprave moderates its content. “If there are people that pursue things

we don’t support, we delete it and kick them out,” he explains. In September 2018, Sprave published a video in the name of the union, [Debunked: YouTube caught lying!](#), in which he criticised the tech giant’s opaque and misleading communication processes. This action resulted in an invitation from YouTube for a number of personal meetings between Sprave and their team.

FAIRTUBE CAMPAIGN SUCCESS

Although this was a fruitful start to unionising efforts, no institutional agreements were reached, and in 2018 YTU decided to join forces with a traditional trade union – IG Metall (the German Metalworkers’ Union), which was founded in 1949 and represents over 2.2 million workers in Germany.

IG Metall had already been involved in other campaigns aimed at improving transparency and the working conditions of digital platform workers, who are usually regarded as self-employed.

“We work with the platforms that have signed the [Crowdsourcing Code of Conduct](#) and we operate the [Ombuds Office](#) that mediates disputes between workers on digital platforms and the platforms themselves,” says Michael ‘Six’ Silberman, a communication officer for IG Metall’s Crowdsourcing Project.

While creators knew the YouTube ecosystem, they lacked the resources to navigate it. “IG Metall had financial resources, lawyers and political influence,” says Sprave. Legal and financial means were important in the prospect of taking YouTube to court. YTU members were asked to approve the cooperation via a Facebook poll and vote on common demands. Not everyone was thrilled with the partnership. “There were some people in the United States who said they hated the fact we were teaming up with a trade union. The unions are not very popular there,” Sprave remembers.

For IG Metall it was important to make sure the communication would be in line with their guidelines. “Hate speech, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. are not welcome in any of our initiatives. We do not hesitate, for example, to delete comments with any of these characteristics in our online channels,” explains Silberman.

In July 2019, YTU and IG Metall launched the FairTube campaign which consisted of three main elements: [a viral 14 minute video](#) in which Sprave outlined the ways in which “it seems like YouTube doesn’t want independent YouTubers anymore”, [a campaign website](#), and six demands for YouTube. The key pressure points included a prospect of a lawsuit against YouTube/Google on the grounds of false self-employment and violation of the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and “collaborative brand attacks” (which would involve YouTubers working en-masse to create videos discrediting YouTube). The campaign received a lot of attention – the size of YTU’s Facebook group almost doubled during the course of the campaign – and YouTube was ready to negotiate.

Thanks to the campaign, YouTube creators now have greater transparency (algorithms are now explained thoroughly), clearer rules, better communication with YouTube, arbitration power (access to senior YouTube managers to challenge decisions regarding cancellations and demonetisations), and greater participation (YouTube now asks its content creators for their feedback regarding innovations).

Sprave says that while he is content with the changes, he is currently looking into making FairTube a registered association that would also be open to other crowdworkers (such as Uber drivers) who would like to pull their knowledge and resources together to organise better conditions for all platform workers.

FULL CASE STUDY

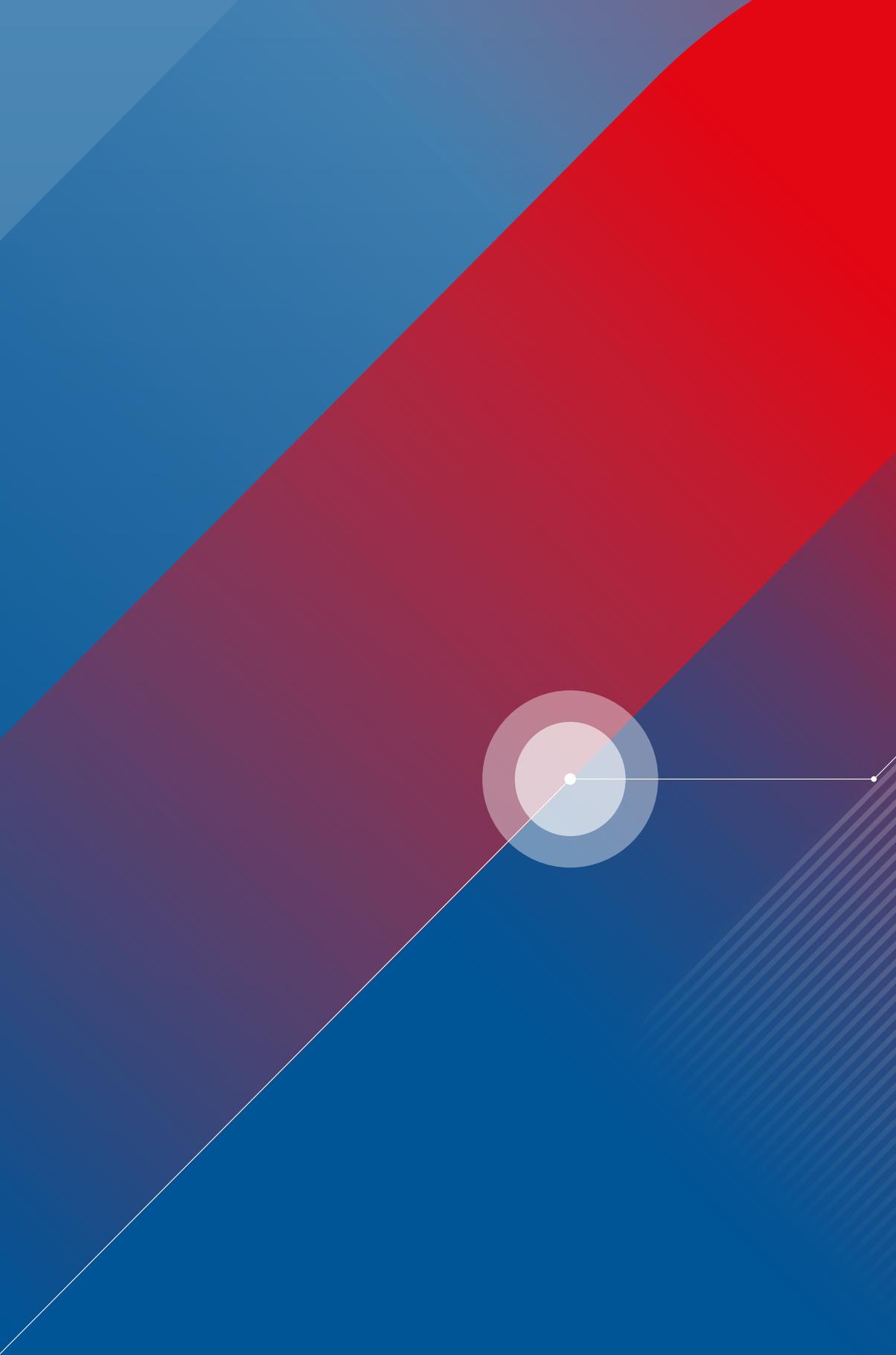


Organising Youtube

A novel case of platform worker organising

AUTHORS Valentin Niebler and Annemarie Kern

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16535&ty=pdf



SECTION 4

RIDERS ON THE STORM



4.1

Uganda's boda boda riders are taking on new technology – and new organising challenges

In Uganda, informal motorcycle taxi drivers are building workers' power by joining unions and utilising digital technology.

By Evelyn Lirri¹

When Kanyike Kiviri first joined the transport industry in 2003 as a motorcycle rider, he lived from hand-to-mouth. His savings were meagre and working conditions were harsh, just like it was for many riders in Uganda's bustling capital, Kampala. Motorcycle taxis, or boda bodas as they are commonly known in Uganda, are a huge part of the public transportation network. With an estimated 200,000 boda boda riders in Kampala alone, they offer a quick means of transport for a significant number of the city's residents where traffic congestion remains a major day-to-day challenge. "Because boda boda riders earn on a day-to-day basis, it can be hard for them to save money. And when they fall sick or get into accidents, they have no fallback position. That's why we decided to organise ourselves," Kiviri explains.

Kiviri is a founding member and current treasurer of the Kampala Metropolitan Boda Boda Entrepreneurs (KAMBE), a cooperative society whose membership spans over 60,000 individuals. He says that through the cooperative, they are working towards transforming the largely informal industry by making it more structured, while at the same time improving the livelihoods of those engaged in it.

¹ Evelyn Lirri is a Ugandan freelance journalist writing on health, environment, human rights and development issues.

KAMBE has gone through its transformation to reach where it is today. Some of its members were previously affiliated to the National Federation for Professional Cyclists Network, which was formed in 2009. But because it was mired in unending conflicts, the federation eventually disintegrated. Then in 2014, another boda boda association called KAMBA was formed, which in 2015 morphed into a cooperative society and was renamed KAMBE. That same year, KAMBE also affiliated to the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU). At the time, the ATGWU had embarked on a plan to revitalise itself as a robust trade union through effective mobilisation.

Formed in 1938 as one of the pioneering labour organisations in Uganda, ATGWU started off as a strong union with a significant membership and influence, fighting for secure and safe working conditions and rights for workers. But it suffered several challenges, especially after the introduction of structural adjustment by the World Bank and IMF, which among others things, gutted the secure, public services jobs of many of its members, resulting in a massive drop in trade union numbers and driving the ATGWU to near collapse. However, in recent years the union has embarked on a long-term strategy to address its internal weaknesses, which include a lack of infrastructural resources, organisational inefficiencies, a lack of member participation and internal cohesion. The ATGWU recognizes that addressing these issues will be key if it is to command a strong influence once again in Uganda's transportation industry.

Part of that strategy has seen it successfully bring on board a significant number of new members. "One of the major achievements of the ATGWU is the dramatic swelling of membership within a short span of time. Surging from a membership of just over 5,000 members in 2014 to a paid-up membership of 105,000, its strategy of revitalization was premised on the affiliation of mass organisations of informal workers, each of which has its own associational and structural power resources," notes the findings of a new report – Riding on a Union App – Uganda's Public Transport Workers' Digital Response to Platforms by Erick Manga, Paula Hamilton and Stephenson Kisingu – by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

Currently, ATGWU's membership spans workers in the transport, oil, chemical, private security and property services industry. In the public transport sector, it has affiliated to its ranks the Boda Boda, Tuk Tuk and the Taxi Workers Union (BOTTAX), the Kampala Metropolitan Boda Boda Entrepreneurs, the Kampala Operational Taxi Stages Association (KOTSA) and the Airport Taxi Services Cooperative Society.

GOING DIGITAL

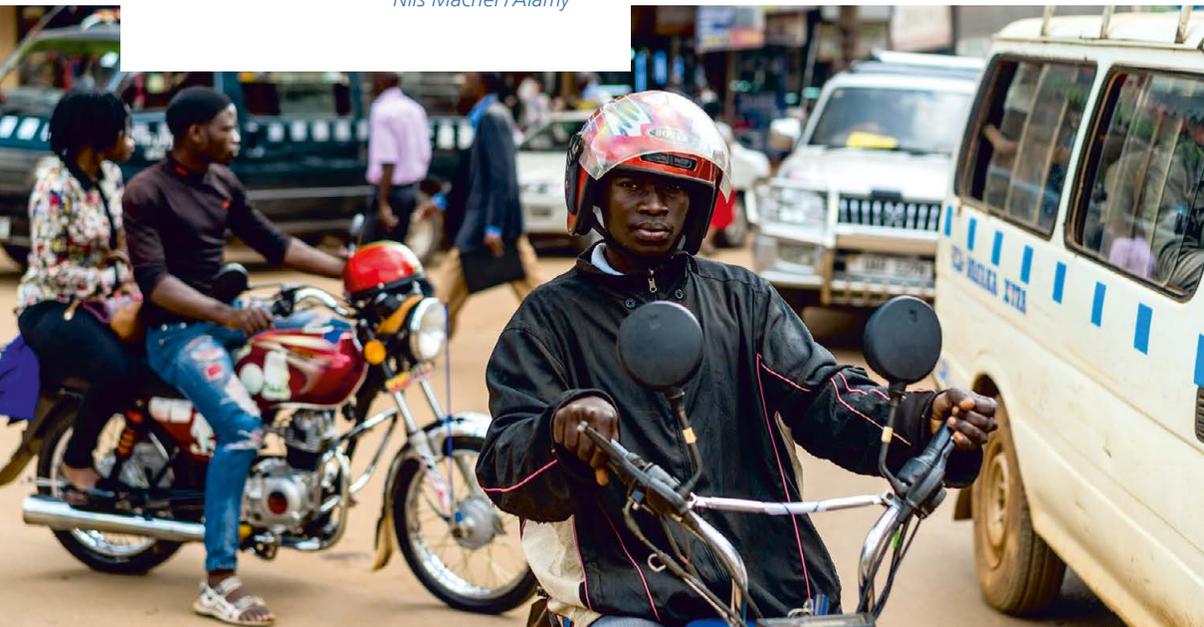
The report reveals that despite this achievement, the union's rapid membership growth has also presented new challenges for the ATGWU, which now needs to "design and develop acceptable service arrangements and internal reforms to address the full integration of the considerable number of informal workers who are now members." The ATGWU is also working to increase its share of boda boda and taxi operators in Kampala around the digital economy by supporting its affiliates to develop their own ride-hailing apps, in a market where huge multinationals such as Uber and Bolt, and big regional companies such as Safe Boda are already operating while undermining workers' rights. So far, KAMBE, KOTSA and the Airport Taxis Cooperative Services have all developed separate digital platforms with the help of AGTWU.

KAMBE's app for example has been developed with features that enables its user-members to manage passenger and courier requests, pay membership fees, save money, withdraw funds and track transactions. "With the app, our members will no longer have to go to the different offices to save their money. They can save through the app and the money goes directly into their KAMBE account," says Kiviri.

There are an estimated 200,000 boda boda drivers in the Uganda capital of Kampala alone. Organising these workers has been key to the resurgence of one of Uganda's oldest unions, the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union

But as the report notes, rolling out the app requires a lot of financial resources, which KAMBE does not have at the moment. Having a smartphone is also an essential element of using the app. But as the report found, many

Nils Macher / Alamy



boda boda riders do not possess smartphones. Kiviri says the KAMBE cooperative has partnered with the Chinese telecoms company TEC-NO, which has agreed to sell smartphones to its members on loan. But there are still challenges abound for the AGTWU, as it seeks to introduce digital solutions into the industry.

One of the key issues it is grappling with is how to address existing gender gaps and increase the digital representation of women. In Uganda, gender gaps around phone ownership remain considerably wide, with 77 per cent of men owning a mobile phone compared to just 54 per cent of women. “Smartphone distribution will be highest amongst male trade union members in each of the associations that have developed, or are planning to implement, platform apps within the AGTWU initiative,” the report reveals.

Mobilising female boda boda riders to join the industry also remains an uphill task. The KAMBE leadership says it is trying to change this by recruiting more women into the association as riders but also to take on leadership roles within its executive. One way it has done this is by starting a women’s group, as an arm of the association. This has led to the recruitment of 12 women to KAMBE’s executive and 40 boda boda riders within the Kampala Metropolitan area. “Through this group, we have managed to convince the women that they too can ride boda bodas and earn a decent income. This wasn’t something we could easily do before,” explains Kiviri.

Noeline Mukisa, one of the female executives in KAMBE says women still face several challenges in the sector, such as sexual harassment and poor working conditions. “When they know that the environment is not safe for them, you will not see many female riders. The same problem has been experienced with taxis,” she says. With all the innovations and mobilisation that KAMBE is spearheading, Kiviri believes the future of many riders like him is bright. “We want to see an organised boda industry where there is discipline, where we are respected and riders can make a decent living,” says Kiviri.

FULL CASE STUDY



Riding on a Union App

Uganda’s Public Transport Workers’ Digital Response to Platforms

AUTHORS Erick Manga, Paula Hamilton, Stephenson Kisingu

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16849&ty=pdf

4.2

The fight for safe rates for transportation workers in South Korea

KPTU-TruckSol has built workers' power and pushed for regulations that have improved the livelihoods of South Korean road transport workers.

By Nithin Coca¹

In the past decade, South Korea has emerged as one of East Asia's most advanced digital economies, with e-commerce, ride-hailing, and other services all growing. But for many truckers and logistics transportation workers, without which these services wouldn't be possible, the benefits have been few and far between. Deregulation, since the early 1990s, has eased the barrier of entry for smaller companies and owner-operators, while the power of large companies to dictate rates has grown, increasing driver precarity.

"The vast majority of truck drivers in Korea, over 90 per cent, are dependently self-employed workers or 'owner drivers', and these workers face several challenges," says Wol-san Liem, director of international affairs at the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU). "They are not recognised as employees or even workers under Korean labour law, meaning that their rights to basic minimum standards, like a minimum wage, working time limits, or freedom of association, are not legally guaranteed."

¹ Nithin Coca is a freelance journalist who focuses on social and economic issues in developing countries, and has specific expertise in south-east Asia.

Despite this, Hwamulyundai, KPTU's Cargo Truckers Solidarity Division (KPTU-TruckSol) has successfully organised a significant percentage of transportation workers. The study [Safety for the Public, Rights for the Driver – South Korea's transport workers campaign for safe rates](#), authored by Aelim Yun for the "Trade Unions in Transformation 4.0" project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), shows how the union effectively used a 'safe rates' campaign strategy, inspired by the experience of the Transport Workers' Union (TWU) in Australia, to build workers' power and push for regulations that have improved the livelihoods of some Korean road transport workers.

KPTU-TruckSol was founded in October 2002 with 1,300 members. Its goal was to organise road transport workers and secure safe working conditions, as well as standard, fair rates to combat the challenges workers face in this sector. "Dependency, owner-driver status, and a lack of legal rights means that drivers have to accept whatever conditions are placed on them, but are also responsible for operating costs, like fuel and repairs, and if any accidents occur," says Liem.

From the very start, organising was a challenge, with union density hovering below 10 per cent. This is partly because, since its inception, KPTU-TruckSol has faced hostility from both the South Korean government and freight transport companies. Its first action, a strike in 2003, initially forced the government to the bargaining table. Instead of accepting the union's demands, the government amended the Trucking Transport Business Act to allow the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport to give back-to-work orders to individual truck drivers involved in a collective refusal-to-work.

This was followed by attempts to remove KPTU-TruckSol's legal status by attempting to force its parent union, KPTU, to exclude owner-operators. Companies, meanwhile, often refuse to negotiate with KPTU-TruckSol, or fire its members for participating in collective actions. There have even been cases of freight transport companies cancelling contracts with owner-operators due to union activity or forcing drivers to give up their membership in order to work.

CROSS-BORDER LEARNING

In 2012, KPTU-TruckSol became aware of a campaign by the TWU in Australia, in which the union successfully pushed for the passage of national 'safe rates' legislation. Safe rates is a regulatory model which involves the imposition of mandatory enforceable legal obligations upon all business firms operating throughout road transport supply chains. It aims to ensure that all road transport workers receive the

same work protections – in terms of health and safety, and also minimum pay rates.

“In 2013, we visited Australia with the goal of learning about this legal system, so we could prove that the South Korean government, who insisted no ‘standard rates’ system exists anywhere else in the world, was lying,” says Yeonsu Park, KPTU-TruckSol’s policy director.

What they discovered was that the legal effort was based on a power-building strategy, in which TWU went beyond workers, engaging the broader public through lobbying and media campaigns focused on the connections between contracting practices, low rates and road accidents.

“After visiting TWU, we started to make this connection too with the slogan ‘Safety for the Public, Rights for Truck Drivers,’” says Park.

From 2013, KPTU-TruckSol adapted TWU’s campaign in Korea, gathering evidence of how low rates led to increased driver fatigue and accident risk, organising an international symposium, and becoming active in the media. In 2016, another strike was waged, demanding safe rates legislation, followed by direct lobbying. It worked: in March 2017, safe rates for drivers in the import-export container transport and bulk cement transport sectors was passed as an amendment to the Trucking Transport Business Act. It set statutory minimum rates to be paid to all relevant road transport drivers, even non-employees, starting from January 2020.

BUILDING POWER

The safe rates campaign has allowed KPTU-TruckSol to, after years of stagnation, grow its membership by roughly 50 per cent in three years. According to the union, since the regulations went into effect on 1 January, membership has grown by 350 members in the bulk cement transport sector, 1400 in the container sector, and by more than 3500 overall.

“We have intentionally focused on identifying and solving issues that are not adequately addressed in the safe rates system and on monitoring and enforcement of the rates in these two sectors,” says Liem. “We have succeeded in organising workers around these demands to make concrete changes in their workplaces.”

Still, much remains to be done, to both expand the scope of safe rates, and to organise more transport workers. Of particular concern



Transport workers at a rally held in Seoul on 30 June 2018, organised by the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union, hold signs that say: 'Safe rates in all sectors!'

is the three-year sunset clause in the legislation, which KPTU-TruckSol wants to abolish.

Another major challenge is better adapting KPTU-TruckSol's model for the emerging digital economy. Its membership remains primarily in the freight-transport sector, but door-to-door delivery services increased by 300 per cent between 2007 and 2017, according to the Korea Transport Database. Even amongst KPTU-TruckSol members, app-based work is increasingly common, with 75 per cent of members using app-based intermediaries in 2018. This is increasing pressure on the performance of truck drivers, who must work for longer hours and engage in more hazardous work practices in order to meet delivery timetables and freight rates.

KPTU-TruckSol

"Our plan is to expand strategic organising not only in the container and bulk cement sectors, but also to steel, retail and parcel delivery," says Lien. They will also have to defend their progress, as the existing safe rates regulation is facing legal challenges from some transport companies and clients. "If not stopped, these actions will destabilise the system, create more turmoil in the industry and push workers to compete even more and engage in dangerous and sometimes illegal actions in order to make a living," says Lien. "It is therefore a very critical time right now, which will determine the future of the road transport industry in Korea."

FULL CASE STUDY



Safety for the Public, Rights for the Driver

South Korea's transport workers campaign for safe rates

AUTHOR Aelim Yun

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16848&ty=pdf

4.3

The mammoth, multi-faceted task of organising app-based transport workers in Indonesia

The value of the online ride-hailing market in Indonesia is worth around US\$18 billion, or 72 per cent of the region's total market value, but transport workers are locked out of the wealth they create thanks to exploitative working practices.

By Randy Mulyanto¹

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic the task of organising Indonesia's app-based transport workers has become ever-more urgent. In 2019, there were an estimated 2.5 million drivers working for Go-Jek, one of the biggest ride-hailing apps in Indonesia, with over nine million working for its rival Grab throughout South-East Asia. Even before the pandemic, they faced low pay and exploitative working practices, but Covid has left these drivers – like most workers in the informal economy – with a drastically reduced income or without any income at all, thanks to tough lockdown measures and scant government assistance.

But a new report outlines not only the plight of Indonesia's app-based transport workers but also the various strategies labour activists are using to organise them – and with which workers are organising themselves. [Resisting Exploitation by Algorithms: Drivers' Contestation of App-based Transport in Indonesia](#) by Fahmi Panimbang, Syarif Arifin, Sugeng Riyadi and Dina Septi Utami, published by

¹ Randy Mulyanto is an Indonesian freelance journalist who was previously based in Taipei.

the Global Trade Union Project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, reveals some of the ways in which various driver organisations are “fighting for their rights in the face of adverse circumstances”.

Labour activist and researcher Fahmi Panimbang, who is one of the report’s co-authors, says that the fact that app-based drivers are not recognised as employees but as ‘partners’, ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ or independent contractors, means that they are not covered by the country’s labour laws. As such, they are not entitled to any benefits or protections from occupational hazards (such as road accidents), occupational diseases (such as lung and respiratory diseases), or from the socio-economic devastation wrought by a global pandemic. “They are in a situation where they have no laws to protect them and the spaces for negotiation or state protection are minimal,” says Panimbang in an interview.

In addition, according to [Statista](#), the value of the online ride-hailing market in Indonesia was worth around US\$18 billion, or 72 per cent of the region’s total market value, as of October 2019. With their venture capital backing and powerful connections (for example, Go-Jek CEO and founder Nadiem Makarim is also the Minister of Education and Culture), the report describes the “imbalance in bargaining power” between the drivers and the tech companies – something which is compounded by the fact that the issuing of work and the drivers’ interactions with the platform are totally controlled by algorithms rather than humans.

As the market for app-based transport continues to grow exponentially in Indonesia, so too does the number of drivers working for these companies. But this has had the overall effect of decreasing drivers’ income (due to increased competition). Drivers are constantly monitored and appraised, with no recourse to appeal any decisions made. As the report states, “work arrangements allow app-based companies to make unilateral changes in tariffs [pay rates], set up point schemes which workers are forced to follow, deactivate or suspend accounts, and terminate work arrangements”. The result is a labour relationship that is “asymmetric and one-sidedly in favour of the company”, pushing the workers into a “vulnerable position”.

THREE FORMS OF ORGANISING

In response, workers are engaged in three forms of organising. The first is known as ‘community’. As Panimbang explains, in a bid to provide each other with flexible, informal mutual support, app-based drivers “form their own communities as they are more likely to help each other”. Membership of these communities – of which there are



Grab and Go-Jek drivers wait for customers in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Sutrisno Jambul / Pacific Press / Alamy Live News

over 5,000 in Greater Jakarta alone – is usually location-based, although communication takes place via WhatsApp as well as in-person at drivers' rest areas called 'base camps', and drivers show their allegiance to a particular community with badges, banners and stickers. Membership dues cost between 10,000-30,000 Indonesian rupiah (US\$ 0.80-2.20) a month, for which drivers are provided with mutual aid and support for a variety of workplace and social issues.

Then there are driver associations, which range from informal groups to larger, formal structures that are registered as civil society organisations. According to the report, associations are "a hotspot for driver mobilisation" with powerful taskforces that liaise with the police and mediate conflicts with non-app based transport drivers. The report notes that "drivers affiliated with the associations have better capacity in protest mobilisation and access to policy makers and government".

Finally, there are the traditional trade unions. There are only a handful of unions organising app-based drivers, and membership numbers are still very small, but the Aerospace and Transportation Workers division of the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers' Union (SPDT-FSPMI) has been organising this group of workers for the last few years. In fact, the report describes it as "the only resourceful drivers' union in Indonesia that is capable of advancing workers' rights in the app-based transport sector".

The SPDT-FSPMI has focused its work in this sector on promoting the labour rights of transport drivers; fighting for the recognition of driv-

ers as workers entitled to basic labour rights; and creating a space for negotiations between driver representatives and app-based transport companies to achieve better working conditions for drivers. One of its main strategies has been mobilising union volunteers to serve with Jamkes Watch, a watchdog for the government's healthcare programme. Volunteers – who target app-based drivers in the hope of organising workers – help mostly low-educated Indonesians to navigate the health service. Later on, the volunteers explain the significance of union membership to those who have received the help.

Another SPDT-FSPMI organising strategy has been the recruitment of retrenched workers from other sectors. According to Ministry of National Development Planning projections in June 2020, some 10.7 to 12.7 million people in Indonesia are expected to lose their jobs due to the pandemic in 2021. Some of them will join the throng of app-based drivers and SPDT-FSPMI wants to make sure that it is first in line to recruit these workers as members.

CHALLENGES TO BUILDING WORKERS' POWER

Several protests and work stoppages initiated by SPDT-FSPMI and other drivers' groups between 2016 to 2019, held to demand higher rates and better working conditions for drivers, were met with a show of force from the platform apps. "This increased structural power of drivers through strikes and mobilisation of protests soon prompted the companies to react by deploying satgas [task forces] to reassert tight control over drivers," it says.

Other challenges remain. The report finds that platform drivers have failed to "receive recognition" of their true employment status by both companies and the government, the result of which is a lack of institutional power. Meanwhile, many drivers have failed to even recognise they are workers who are entitled to labour rights as stipulated in the Labour Act, reflecting "a lack of associational power".

The threat to and intimidation of union and human rights activists are also being "stepped up to cow them into silence". For example, activists have received fake food orders from Grab and Go-Jek apps with messages from an unknown number stating "be careful when you leave your house".

Moving forward, the report calls on the federation to find innovative driver-organising strategies to develop resistance and secure workers' rights. "The SPDT-FSPMI needs to develop the capacity of its organisers, to equip them with specific organising skills in the app-based transport sector, and to provide them with a better understanding of

the different contexts and circumstances of organising work,” the report recommends.

animbang says he hopes that the Indonesian government will create more negotiation opportunities in the future and calls on the state to extend labour regulations and laws to app-based drivers. “Companies must listen to the aspirations of their workers,” he says. “This means that businesses must respect human rights, and the state must also protect its citizens.” However, at present, the commitment to do so is “very minimal,” he laments.

FULL CASE STUDY



Resisting Exploitation by Algorithms

Drivers’ Contestation of App-based Transport in Indonesia

AUTHORS Fahmi Panimbang, Syarif Arifin, Sugeng Riyadi, Dina Septi Utami

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16599&ty=pdf

4.4

Around the world, platform food couriers are mobilising for basic workers' rights

As the pandemic puts the unfair working conditions of gig workers under the spotlight, a recent study has uncovered a growing number of protests undertaken by food delivery platform workers worldwide.

By Marina Watson Peláez¹

As Covid-19 forces citizens around the world into lockdown and food delivery workers go into overdrive to provide relief to customers, a new report has shone a light on the poor working conditions faced by food couriers globally, as well as some of the steps that workers are taking to challenge the status quo.

The recent FES study [Global labour unrest on platforms – The case of food delivery workers](#) by Vera Trappmann, Ioulia Bessa, Simon Joyce, Denis Neumann, Mark Stuart and Charles Umney looks at six global food delivery brands operating in more than two global regions – Uber Eats, Just Eat, Deliveroo, Foodora, Zomato, and Glovo – in addition to a further 12 companies that operate regionally. Between them, these 18 companies deliver cooked and prepared food to customers in 95 countries.

The research, which was based on [the Leeds Index](#) – a unique dataset logging platform labour unrest around the world – found that there had been 527 incidents of labour unrest from 1 January 2017 to 20

¹ Marina Watson Peláez is a freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker based in Lisbon, Portugal.

May 2020, across 36 different countries – something the report authors describe as “a remarkable number of protests”. Most of the incidents took place in Europe, followed by Asia, which accounted for around a quarter of all incidents, while one-sixth took place in South America.

The research reveals “a gradual increase in protests from early 2017 to a significant spike in the third quarter of 2019, with a notable decline since then”. At a national level, the highest number of incidents occurred in China, followed by the UK, Spain and then Argentina. In terms of single companies, labour unrest was most prevalent in the UK-headquartered food delivery platform Deliveroo, with most incidents taking place in Europe, specifically in the UK, Spain, France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

“Deliveroo was operating in 16 countries but interestingly there was a spillover effect, so grassroots unions were reaching out to other unions in other countries and providing each other with flyers and material,” says Vera Trappmann, one of the co-authors of the report and an associate professor in work and employment relations at Leeds University in the UK. “There was this transnational feeling of ‘they [our peers] have done something and we want to do something too.’” There were also a number of cases where labour unrest traversed multiple companies and multiple locations, “suggesting platform workers are developing the capacity to wage concerted campaigns and build solidarity,” the report notes.

POOR PAY, THE MOST DOMINANT DRIVER OF LABOUR UNREST GLOBALLY

Pay was the most dominant driver of labour unrest across all regions, except for in the United States, where employment status was the most significant factor. Workers demanded higher pay, healthcare provisions, and frequently criticised the insufficient protective gear provided by platform companies such as PedidosYa, Glovo, SinDelantal and Uber Eats.

In South America, health and safety was the main source of disquiet, an issue that has really come to the fore since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. While food delivery workers have been recognised as essential workers, at the same time they are being locked out of fundamental labour rights because they are forced by the platform companies to work as self-employed contractors. “On one hand it has to do with the risk posed by the rising number of [coronavirus] cases and on the other hand that they lack health insurance, so workers are operating entirely on their own risk,” Trappmann explains.



A food delivery courier watches delivery back-packs burn in front of the Barcelona headquarters of the Spanish food delivery start-up Glovo on 26 May 2019. Workers protested poor working conditions after a road traffic accident resulted in the death of a delivery rider.

SOPA Images Limited / Alamy Stock Photo

“What’s interesting is that we are seeing a variety of protests – not just strikes, which are the classic model,” says Trappman, who plans (along with her co-researchers) to enlarge the database and make it publicly available online for labour activists around the world. Although strikes and logoffs were the most frequent type of action taken, they were closely followed by

demonstrations, legal actions and institutionalisation (which refers to worker protests that lead to institution building, such as the formation of works councils or the negotiation of collective agreements). “It is quite likely that in countries like China workers were relying more on logoffs and disruptive actions in the absence of an open media system that would allow any effect following demonstrations,” the authors noted, “while legal action might be more likely in countries like Australia, given its historical tradition of legal arbitration.”

INFORMAL GROUPS INVOLVED IN THE MAJORITY OF EVENTS

Platform labour protest tends to be led from the grassroots, with informal groups of workers playing a vital role in the vast majority of direct action. Even though most individual protests tend to involve less than 100 workers and last less than a day, the report notes that the duration of a protest does not determine its efficacy.

Informal groups of workers were the main actors of labour unrest in Asia and South America. Informal groups of workers were slightly less prominent – though still ubiquitous – in Europe, and much less involved in North America and Australia. “It’s mainly the workers who directly raise their voice and take action, often with little reliance on union representation,” say the report authors.

However, unions were involved in more than half of the labour unrest noted by researchers. While this was pretty evenly split between established trade unions (involved in 27.6 per cent of cases) and independent unions (26.9 per cent), there were large regional differences. For example, mainstream trade unions were the dominant actor in Australia (68.8 per cent) and were relatively active in Europe (37 per cent) but were virtually absent in Asia (a mere 1 per cent). Where unions did get involved, grassroots unions tended to support strikes and logoffs while mainstream unions were active in demonstrations and in launching legal action.

For researchers, the last few years of platform worker unrest demonstrates a broadening of the concept of associational power, which is usually identified with the collective organization of workers through trade unions. What we are seeing with platform food workers is “militant, self-organised collective action”, according to the report, agitated for by workers without formal labour rights, and for whom institutional power is “often an aim of collective action rather than a pre-condition or an outcome”. As a result, “the associational power of workers is rising,” says Trappmann.

FULL CASE STUDY



Global Labour Unrest on Platforms

The case of food delivery workers

AUTHORS Vera Trappmann, Ioulia Bessa, Simon Joyce,
Denis Neumann, Mark Stuart, Charles Umney

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16880&ty=pdf

4.5

Igniting

'improvisational unionism'

The case of Deliveroo couriers in Belgium and the Netherlands

A wave of labour action by food delivery couriers created the opportunity for traditional trade unions to respond to new challenges in the platform economy.

By Tom Cassauwers¹

In 2018, the location of Deliveroo's Brussels headquarters was a by-word for idyllic. Based in Ixelles, a well-heeled suburb of the European capital, the building was right next to a beautiful park that is also home to a former monastery. But one day in January, this suburban calm was shattered by a few dozen angry Deliveroo couriers who showed up on their bikes.

Until that point, the riders had been able to invoice Deliveroo via SMart, a Belgian labour market intermediary which acts as a proxy employer of freelancers, and which had managed to negotiate standardised pay and access to social security for Deliveroo riders in Belgium. But then, Deliveroo decided to terminate its collaboration with Smart, forcing all of its couriers to become self-employed, meaning less wages, no labour protections and more administrative hassle.

The protesting workers, a fleeting group numbering no more than 15 to 20 people at any one time, ended up staying for almost a week, occupying the office of the British food delivery giant. Out of the

¹ Tom Cassauwers is a freelance journalist from Belgium. He currently writes about startups, technology, social movements and Latin America. You can read his work at tomcassauwers.com.

window hung a banner saying 'Slaveroo'. The couriers began their action spontaneously, started by an activist core of riders, although over time established unions got involved on an ad-hoc basis.

Martin Willems from United Freelancers, the freelance section of the Belgian union ACV, says he began to establish links with Deliveroo couriers in 2017, two years after the company launched in the Belgian capital. He was with the couriers during their occupation of the headquarters. Willems says that working with the Deliveroo couriers wasn't easy: "The traditional channels of our union didn't work here," he says. Couriers that work for highly precarious, 'gig economy' platforms such as Deliveroo and Uber Eats, that serve as digital middle-men between restaurants and couriers, often have a high staff turnover. Generally riders just work on a platform for a few months, and these young, often migrant, workers sometimes express distrust for unions. "They don't really know what a union is," says Willems. "They think it's something for traditional workers with a permanent contract, certainly not something for them."

And then there was the problem of actually connecting with them in the first place. Couriers don't just gather in one workplace or on the factory floor. This highly mobile group of workers instead tends to communicate through messaging services like Whatsapp or via informal contact on the street.

Yet over time the unions managed to make inroads with the couriers. Willems recounts how he rode across Brussels on a bike, carrying pamphlets with him, giving them out whenever he saw a courier. At other times, unions ordered large amounts of pizza, just so they could talk to the riders who delivered them.

In turn the unions started offering support to the couriers. They helped in court cases, set up contacts with other social movements and supported them when things heated up, such as when Brussels couriers occupied the Deliveroo headquarters.

This wave of activism was part of the 2017-2018 protest movement amongst platform couriers in Belgium and the Netherlands. By suddenly changing the employment status of their riders in the two countries, without consultation, the company prompted protests where couriers and established unions learned to work together. An unique pattern emerged in comparison to other European countries, where couriers either stayed independent or joined smaller, alternative unions. According to Kurt Vandaele, a researcher for the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), the Belgian and Dutch experiences offer key lessons for the unions of the future.



On 8 January 2018, Deliveroo riders rallied outside of the company's Brussels head-quarters during a week-long protest against a move to force its workers to register as self-employed.

Mathieux Golinvaux

"I call it 'improvisational unionism,'" says the author of a new Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung report [From Street Protest to 'Improvisational Unionism' – Platform-based food delivery couriers in Belgium and the Netherlands](#). "Which means unions let themselves be guided by the context," says Vandaele. "Unions are today confronted by new challenges where old models, like collective bargaining, are currently impossible. So they need to adopt new tactics, which happened when the couriers connected with the unions."

UNIONS OFFER A LISTENING EAR AND A HELPING HAND

During the 2017-2018 protest wave, unions primarily focused on providing support, letting the riders run the show. "In both Belgium and the Netherlands, unions mainly listened," says Vandaele. "They didn't just force their model on the couriers. The platform economy was new for unions. They didn't want to block this innovation, yet they also wanted to improve working conditions for couriers."

The result of all this activism is still somewhat unclear. Platforms managed to push through the switch to self-employment, and court cases are still unfinished in Belgium and the Netherlands. "It's still ongoing," admits Vandaele. Unions also didn't gain many new members. Little independent data is available on the total number of couriers working in Belgium and the Netherlands, but a Deliveroo spokesper-

son claimed in the summer of 2019 that there were 2,600 active couriers in Belgium. In March of 2020 a Dutch counterpart said around 2,500 couriers worked for Deliveroo in the Netherlands. But that courier population is constantly changing, which hardly makes for the best recruitment environment.

Nevertheless, Vandaele and Willems say the mobilisation brought with it other lessons and successes. There was media attention. Unions in Belgium and the Netherlands were used to hostile press coverage of their work, but the events were covered in a positive way, particularly in the Netherlands. In addition, “internally, unions now pay more attention to the platform economy,” adds Vandaele. “It also allowed them to experiment with new organising tactics.”

There were some differences in how Belgian and Dutch unions approached their situations. “Organising has been popular in some Dutch unions since the early 2000s,” says Vandaele. “So this wasn’t very new for them.” In Belgium, however, unions tend to be more focused on political lobbying. “This is logical considering their strong position in Belgian society,” explains Vandaele. “If lobbying doesn’t work, then they start mobilising, which means bringing out their own militants. These are people who are already committed union members. Organising, however, aims to develop a bigger pool of committed members. So not only those who are already convinced, but also regular members and even un-organised workers.”

Vandaele’s research offers a number of insights for unions. “Unions often think that precarious workers and young people don’t care about unions,” says the researcher. “While this protest wave shows this isn’t the case. Unions were surprised that these young people were interested in them. They need to engage with these new sectors, they can show new workers that they can help. Platform companies often say that young people don’t like unions. But these experiences contradict that.”

Willems, who continues to organise precarious workers and freelancers, agrees. “These workers can and want to organise and defend their working conditions, whether or not they like existing unions. The question is if unions can support them in their situation.”

He sees this wave of organising as a return to the earlier traditions of unionism. “We cannot only rely on traditional union work,” he says. “In the 19th century there were no laws that allowed workers to organise. That all happened because of the struggles of the workers. Today we need to repeat this for new groups of workers. Over the past 30 years unions remained at a standstill. Yet, that wasn’t always the case. In our early history we had to develop new tactics and organise. Today we need to do that again.”

FULL CASE STUDY



**From Street Protest to
›Improvational Unionism‹**

Platform-based food delivery couriers
in Belgium and the Netherlands

AUTHOR Kurt Vandaele

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16608&ty=pdf

4.6

An Argentinian platform workers' union, the first of its kind in the region, is fighting for the rights of delivery workers and revitalising the union struggle

The Asociación de Personal de Plataformas (APP) is organising delivery workers. They are some of society's most vulnerable workers, made even more vulnerable by Covid-19, while simultaneously fighting for the normalisation of their employment relationships and for official recognition as a union.

By Camille Audibert¹

The change came in a matter of weeks. The streets of Buenos Aires were suddenly awash in red, orange and yellow, the colours of the backpacks worn by delivery platform workers, workers who pedal full speed for maximum efficiency. Already well established in other parts of the world, platform companies first appeared in Argentina in 2018, initially in the capital followed by other regions. Over the last two years, Colombian company Rappi, Spanish company Glovo and Uruguayan company PedidosYa have become part of the urban landscape as well as the habits of many consumers, who request the services of thousands of delivery workers at any time of day or night.

But rather than becoming just one more country in the expansion of these multinationals, the unexpected happened in Argentina: the formation in record time of the region's first platform workers' union, the Asociación de Personal de Plataformas (the Platform Personnel Association, APP). Its trajectory is "both relevant and exceptional," according to a study published by the German foundation Friedrich-

¹ Camille Audibert is a freelance journalist based in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in September 2020 – Proudly delivered by APP – The struggle of Latin America’s first union for platform workers.

“The visibility of working conditions and workers’ demands provided a voice and a critical perspective on the image and discourse of innovation, flexibility, autonomy and entrepreneurship that these companies have been pushing from the moment they arrived,” argues the team of researchers composed of Laura Perelman, Marcelo Mangini, Bárbara Perrot, María Belén Fierro and Martina Sol Garbarz.

FROM LATIN AMERICA’S FIRST ‘DIGITAL STRIKE’ TO THE FORMATION OF THE APP

The spark came when Rappi unilaterally changed its order allocation algorithm. Though the company had been in Argentina for less than six months, discontent among its workers began to grow and soon found expression in several WhatsApp groups created by workers to communicate with one another. With no official meeting place, delivery workers began to gather in the plazas of Buenos Aires, where in July 2018, they decided not to fulfil orders accepted over the application under the pretext of having suffered an accident. This was the highly visible beginning of Latin America’s first ‘digital strike.’

The union’s formation was accelerated by the escalating confrontation between Rappi and a group of spokespersons elected by the delivery workers. While the two parties were holding an informal dialogue over the course of several days, one delivery worker’s account was ‘blocked’ by the company, an action tantamount to termination. It was against this backdrop, in October 2018, that the organisation officially requested registration as a union with the Ministry of Labour.

As the FES report states: “Over the following weeks, APP workers began to receive fewer orders, something [they] interpreted as anti-union behaviour on the part of the company.” Shortly thereafter, in a measure that could be seen as disciplinary, the accounts of several (union-affiliated) delivery workers were definitively blocked, an action that torpedoed the relationship between the union’s spokespersons and the rest of the workers.

One of the blocked accounts belonged to Roger Rojas, the union’s secretary general since its inception and one of the most senior platform workers. “The block came as a surprise,” says the 35-year-old Venezuelan, whose demographic profile is far from exceptional amongst delivery workers: they are generally young, male and migrants. As Rojas explains, without recognised and transparent dia-



logue between the workers and the companies, the arbitrary blocking of an account ends up being a threat.

Moreover, the (recently restored) Ministry of Labour's lack of recognition of the APP as a union increases members' vulnerability since they do not enjoy special protection. "We know that being blocked is always a possibility, companies can use any excuse," says Rojas, who now works for competing delivery companies and is listed as a consolidated taxpayer in Argentina's single tax system for small business and individuals.

In just a few years, platform delivery companies like Rappi have become extremely popular in Argentina. In 2018, platform workers formed the Asociación de Personal de Plataformas (APP) to provide members with a means of collective action as well as support.

Myriam Borzeel/Alamy Stock Photo

LEGAL BATTLE AND UNION REVITALISATION

In an effort to reintegrate the 'blocked' workers and protect those who chose to join the newly formed APP, the organisation embarked on a legal battle, seeking an injunction before the labour justice system with the crucial help of a team of lawyers providing legal counsel. In the first verdict, the judge ruled that "anti-union conduct" must cease and that Rappi must reinstate the blocked delivery workers. The company refused to do so and appealed. The case remains unresolved.

According to the FES report: "This legal case is of the utmost relevance for the recognition of the rights of workers in this field. Its relevance extends from the normalisation of employment relationships

to the recognition of the right of platform workers to unionise and form trade associations that represents them.”

Formal recognition of the APP requires proof of its members’ employment relationships; the companies, however, refuse to recognise this relationship, instead referring to their workers as ‘collaborators’ or ‘partners.’ “Our main objective is regularisation: we must be recognised as workers [...]. That would be a great achievement, for workers here and around the world,” says Rojas. Meanwhile, as the APP argues, these workers are working in the informal sector, in a precarious and unprotected environment.

The lack of official recognition may come as a surprise in a country with a high number of trade unions and a high rate of union affiliation for the region. But the APP was born during the neoliberal presidency of Mauricio Macri (2015-2019), which provided a hostile climate for trade unions. As the FES report states: “The absence of union protection reinforced the vulnerability of the collective and its capacity to accumulate organisational density, deploy collective actions and engage in dialogue and negotiations with companies.”

Without a permanent headquarters or dedicated workplace, and in the midst of a pandemic, organising around the union agenda has become more necessary than ever. Delivery workers are everywhere: they can be seen in small groups, sometimes sitting on the sidewalk, sometimes leaning against the wall of a restaurant waiting for food for their next delivery, now with a mask and social distancing. These moments of respite have been and continue to be vital in establishing union contacts and strengthening the bonds between workers. “We organise using the famous WhatsApp,” says Rojas with a smile. With the creation of the union, workers now have an additional platform for exchange. “It’s very good in terms of its scope and practicality,” says the APP’s secretary general.

For the time being, the delivery workers continue to wait for the court’s ruling. Official recognition of an employment relationship and formal registration of the APP as a union would create a “crucial precedent,” stresses the FES report, which describes the union’s rapid and unconventional’ trajectory as a possible “model for thinking about new forms of organisation and union action that lay the groundwork for union revitalisation.”

FULL CASE STUDY



Proudly Delivered by App

The struggle of Latin America's first union for platform workers

AUTHORS Laura Perelman, Marcelo Mangini, Bárbara Perrot, María Belén Fierro and Martina Sol Garbarz

LINK www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16615&ty=pdf

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LAYOUT

Bergsee, blau

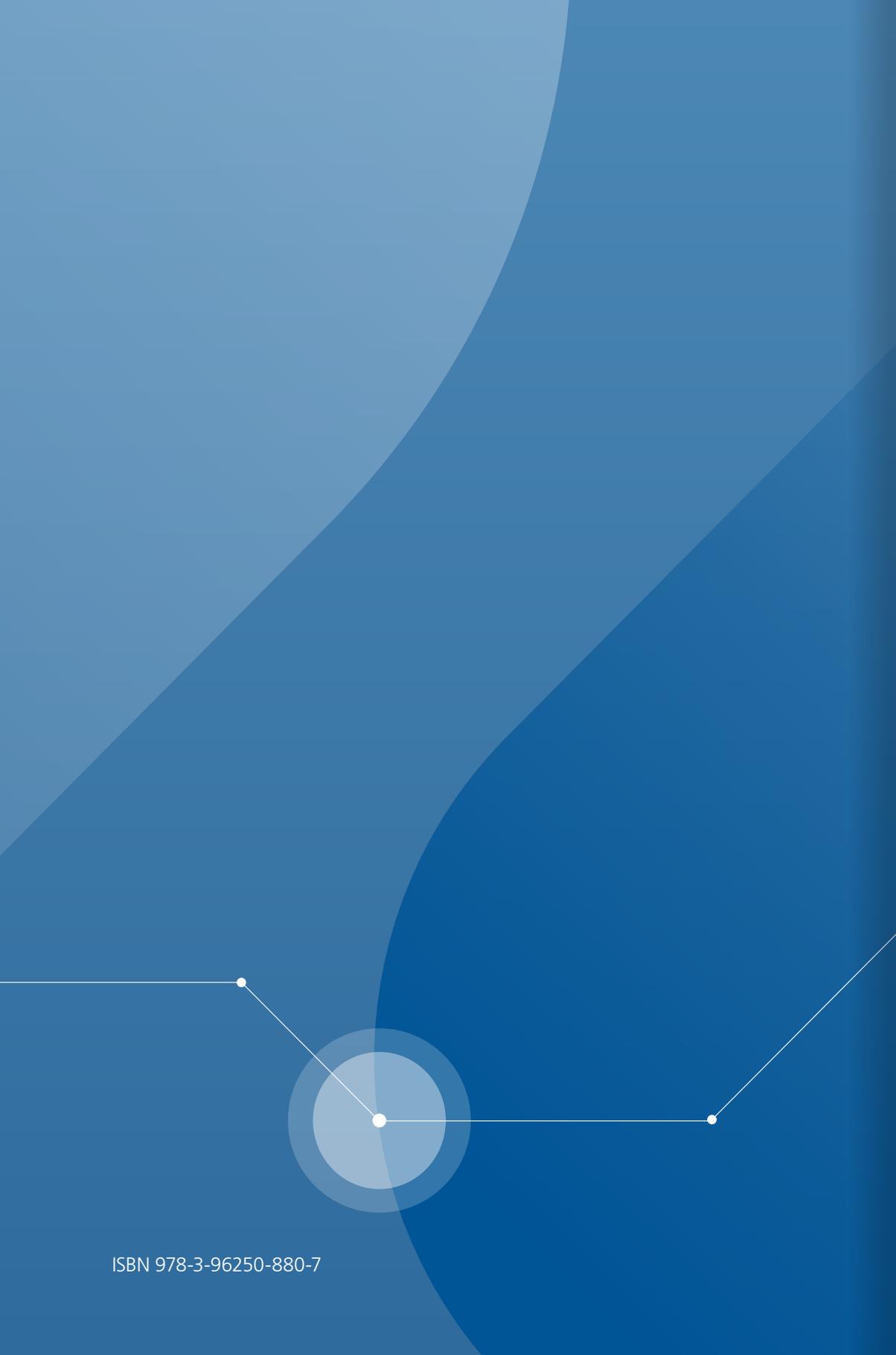
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