

# Trade Unions, working class internationalism, & changing global World of Work



# ALL workers need trade unions – or at least independent representative workers' organisations.

- All workers are vulnerable to dismissal, bad health and safety conditions, and pay that does not meet their needs
- Changes have taken place in formal workplaces:
  - more than one employer in one workplace because of outsourcing, subcontracting and use of labour brokers;
  - many workers no longer on permanent full time contracts.
- Workers in isolated situations like domestic workers, farm workers, workers in very small companies, or self-employed such as most street vendors and waste pickers, are extra vulnerable.
- Migrant workers from other countries are very vulnerable.
- Young women in all sectors are vulnerable because of exposure to high levels of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace.
- New forms of work, such as “platform” work is increasingly common in the services sector – often called “the new informal” due to these new forms of work being informalised as soon as they appear.

The growth in all these new forms of work, and decrease or limited growth in formal jobs, has produced an increasingly vulnerable global workforce – which faces challenges at work, and challenges to the exercise of their fundamental rights to organize and collectively represent their interests.

# NEW FORMS of ORGANISING – WHAT DO VULNERABLE WORKERS NEED?

- *Organizing/Labour Rights:* For ALL workers
- *Legal Identity & Standing:* Extension of scope of labour laws to categories of workers traditionally excluded and/or amendment of laws so they cover the full range of relationships under which work is performed.
- *Economic Rights:* Vulnerable workers need a wide range of labour, trade, and land-use rights in order to improve their employment arrangements, secure their livelihoods, make their economic activities more productive; and use their representative voice to achieve appropriate changes to the wider institutional environment that affects their work and livelihoods.
- *Social Rights, including Social Protection:* Includes rights to housing, education, health, food security, water, sanitation and social protection against the core contingencies of illness, disability, old age, death, and work-related risks. Maternity and child care are a priority due to the over-representation of women in vulnerable sectors incl. the informal economy.

# COLLECTIVE BARGAINING – NOTHING FOR US WITHOUT US!!

- For vulnerable workers (*including those in the informal economy*) to exercise their full labour rights, they must be able to regulate their working conditions through collective bargaining processes that involve democratically elected representatives of the worker-controlled organizations of their choice.
- For employees such collective bargaining will be with an employer, but for the self-employed such as street vendors or waste pickers, local authorities would be the appropriate bargaining counterpart.
- Existing bargaining forums are designed for workers with formal employment relationships. They do not lend themselves to addressing the issues faced by workers in the informal economy or new forms of work.
- **New, appropriate bargaining forums must be created.** This requires designing the rules of participation, establishing criteria for determining the issues for negotiation, and envisaging how such new forums will engage with the wider policymaking and regulatory frameworks so that these become a meaningful part of participatory decision-making.

**Methodology:** Main purpose of organising collectively is to engage in **collective negotiations** with identified negotiating counterparts for changes to working conditions – basic step-by-step approach:

1. Needs assessment (identify problems)
2. Convert needs/problems into demands for negotiation
3. Identify negotiating counterpart for each demand
4. Approach negotiating counterpart for negotiating meeting, then maintain continuity of meetings
5. Report to members and prepare to demonstrate if demands are not won

**It is not rocket science!!** Just needs mindset change

Systems of representation by exclusively formal economy representatives in tripartite forums need to be extended by including the direct representation of workers in the informal economy and new forms of work. This is needed to improve the legitimacy of such forums in changing labour markets and the changing world of work.



# CHALLENGES FACING TRADE UNIONS

How can trade unions know what are the right issues and demands to put forward in order to create decent work in the informal economy, if they have not yet organised workers in the informal economy and new forms of work? With the best will in the world, all they can do is guess what they think may be the interests and demands of workers in the informal economy, and put these forward. But this is patronizing, and no better than those Heads of State who formulate policies after guessing what their people need, instead of engaging in proper consultation with those directly affected.

Trade unions have to confront these challenges proactively by tackling the following practical issues:

- Political will
- Legal changes, where national laws are an obstacle
- Constitutional changes: change trade union constitutions where this is the obstacle
- New organising strategies
- Women leadership: overcoming the traditional male bias in formal sector trade unions
- Intersectional leadership profile – untouchable castes, PWD, LGBTI+ visibility in leadership
- Learning from those doing it already: Many new models operating in countries of Global South
- Organising workers in the informal economy as workers as EQUALS
- Joint campaigns
- Tackling globalisation together

The strength of trade unions lies in their ability to represent the interests of members to whom they are directly accountable and from whom they get a direct mandate. It is not good enough for formal sector trade unions to claim the right to represent workers in the informal economy who are not their members and who have not given them a direct mandate, just because they define themselves as working class organisations. The only way to genuinely represent workers in the informal economy and put forward their demands for decent work, is by organising them, and opening the way for their elected representatives to participate directly in negotiations and policy dialogue.

# OFFICIAL INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

- The International Labour Organisation (ILO) started to address some of the vulnerable work sectors through its 1996 Convention 177 on Homework and 2011 Convention 189 on Domestic Workers. In 2014 and 2015 the International Labour Conference (ILC) of the ILO adopted Recommendation 204 on “transitioning from the informal to the formal economy” – which highlighted the own-account work sectors, such as the majority of street vendors and waste pickers.
- ILO has accredited international membership-based organizations (MBOs) of workers in the informal economy as labour “NGOs” (*i.e. same category as ITUC, WFTU and the GUFs*) to participate in International Labour Conferences, e.g.
  - **StreetNet International** (street vendors & informal traders)
  - **International Domestic Workers’ Federation**

These organizations attend tripartite International Labour Conferences of the ILO and participate as an integral part of the Workers’ Group – NOT as a separate social partner, as in the tripartite-plus model we boast about and practice in NEDLAC in South Africa.

There are many drawbacks to being in the Community Constituency in NEDLAC, which does not have equal status to the other constituencies.

# INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSES

The international trade union movement has made important strides in addressing these organizational challenges, although the progress between national trade union movements is rather uneven.

South Africa is not one of the leading examples, but lagging behind most other African countries in this regard – along with the countries of the industrial Global North.

COSATU Vulnerable Workers' Task team: as a result of a decision of the 2012 COSATU Congress, a Vulnerable Workers Task Team was established by COSATU. The aim was to intensify efforts to organise, amongst others:-

- Farm workers / Workers in shops, restaurants & hotels
- Street traders / Home-based workers / All sub-contracted workers
- Construction workers / Contract cleaning workers / Domestic workers
- Petrol station workers / Call centre workers / EPWP workers
- All young workers, especially young women / Taxi workers
- All migrant workers regardless of legal status
- Security guards / All workers enslaved by labour brokers

This was a good start, but got interrupted by the splits and divisions which occurred in COSATU since that time and has not sustained or accumulated momentum.

In Southern Africa, OTM in Moçambique was the first trade union to establish an informal economy organisation in the 1990s, today known as AEIMO (Associação da Economia Informal de Moçambique) which is a full affiliate of OTM, participating in the national and provincial conferences, Youth and Women's structures of OTM.



At the same time, UNTA in Angola was establishing provincial unions of informal commerce workers, STCI (*Sindicato de Trabalhadores do Comércio Informal*) which are affiliated to the national federation FENSTACHS (*Federação Nacional de Sindicatos de Trabalhadores Industria Alimentar, Comercio, Hotelaria, Turismo e Similares*) which is affiliated to UNTA.



# Unions of own-account workers

- The first union of own-account workers was SEWA in India (a union of self-employed women workers) established in 1972. SEWA was eventually registered as an independent national trade union centre – now has 2 million members
- In Francophone West Africa in 1990s already, ILO ACTRAV actively encouraged associations of workers in informal economy to register themselves as unions. This increased the membership of the entire trade union movement.
- In Nicaragua, CTCP (*Confederacion de Trabajadores por Cuenta Propia*) became the largest union in the country and caused the national trade union centre FNT to which it is affiliated to bypass the traditional national trade union centres in membership.

**December 2003** – SEWA (Self-Employed Women’s Association), StreetNet International, Ghana TUC, Nigeria Labour Congress, CROC (*Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos*) Mexico and HomeNet Thailand joined forces to convene an international meeting on organizing workers in the informal economy in Ahmedabad, India. Attended by trade unions and other workers’ organizations already active in the field of organizing workers in different sectors of the informal economy, who exchanged their experiences and started to network internationally.

**SEPTEMBER 2006** – THE SAME INTERNATIONAL COORDINATING COMMITTEE ORGANISED A FOLLOW-UP MEETING OF THE SAME AND NEWLY-DISCOVERED ORGANIZATIONS ORGANIZING WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN ACRA, GHANA.

In between, the International Coordinating Committee convened lunch-time meetings for all the trade unions attending the annual International Labour Conferences of the ILO in Geneva to report on progress around the world in organizing workers in the informal economy, to network and make new connections. It was not long before SEWA and StreetNet International were accepted internationally as trade union organizations (of a special type) by all the trade unions attending International Labour Conferences.

At national level all around the world, StreetNet made a habit of visiting all national trade union federations when they visited their countries, to introduce themselves, their work and their local affiliates, and build solidarity relationships in as many countries as possible.

A non-sectarian approach was practiced of visiting all national centres, no matter which international confederation they were affiliated to. In this way, StreetNet now has relationships of solidarity with both ITUC and WFTU, many of their affiliates and their regional structures. Work on organisation of workers in the informal economy and new forms of work has also been done over the years in partnership with GUFs such as BWI, IndustriALL, ITF, IUF, PSI.

In 2019 StreetNet was invited by CUT Brazil to participate in an international seminar which they hosted in São Paulo on “New forms of worker organisation needed in changing World of Work”. Following that seminar, CUT worked in collaboration with StreetNet’s Brazilian affiliate UNICAB to establish a new trade union of informal traders and “entregadores” (scooter delivery platform workers) which was established in a virtual launch on 20 October 2020, attended by StreetNet International among the international guests.

During the COVID pandemic, the numbers of “entregadores” in São Paulo had increased by 20% and they had gone on strike against poor working conditions under banner “Black Lives Matter” (*Vidas Pretas Importam*).

THE NEW (CITY-BASED) TRADE UNION, CALLED **SIPATEI**, IS AFFILIATED TO **CUT BRAZIL**, TO CUT’S COMMERCIAL WORKERS’ UNION **CONTRACS**, AND TO **UNICAB** NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF STREET VENDORS & INFORMAL TRADERS.

THIS BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE SHOULD NOW BE FOLLOWED BY TRADE UNIONS IN OTHER COUNTRIES.

# SOME QUESTIONS for DISCUSSION & DEBATE

- Corporatisation of TUs – how to respond?
- Reassessing industrial union model and its suitability for new world of work
- New forms of worker organization – social movement unionism, organizations of own-account workers, organizations of platform workers in Gig Economy, etc.
- Case studies of organisations of own-account workers – SEWA (India), CTCF-FNT (Nicaragua)
- Reassessing tripartite collective bargaining models & institutions – are tripartite-plus models the answer?
- Building socialism through TUs – radical syndicalism?
- Relationships between TUs & political parties – pros & cons



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