

Can Workers in the Informal Economy Organise for Labour Rights? Evidence from Tanzania's Transport Workers

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This Development Viewpoint draws on [Rizzo 2013](#) to analyse how informal transport workers in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest city, succeeded over time in building a workers' organisation that made progress in establishing employment rights for its members.

It is widely believed that organising efforts for employment rights among informal workers are not likely to be successful. The main reason given is that informal employment relationships do not embody a direct employer–employee relationship.

But the relative success of Tanzania's transport workers demonstrates that progress can be made. And their protracted struggles highlight some important general lessons.

The Context for Struggle

Dar es Salaam is a city with an estimated three million residents. Its bus transport system relies on about 10,000 privately owned minibuses, also known as *daladala*, to provide the cheapest means of mass public transport.

In the operations of *daladala* there is a clear division between a small class of bus owners and a large class of transport workers estimated to be between 20,000 and 30,000. The great majority of these workers are casual workers operating buses that they do not own. And the oversupply of such workers hampers their bargaining power.

How they are paid by their employers also transfers most of the operating risks onto the workforce. Workers have to pay a daily non-negotiable rent to the owners to operate their buses, and they earn their meager income only after subtracting all operational expenses.

Therefore, at the beginning of each working day, the profit for bus owners is known while the incomes of the workforce, if any, are uncertain. Moreover, workers face harsh working conditions. Their average working day stretches to 15 hours and their working week to 6.5 days. Their occupations are also insecure since the average tenure on any given bus is less than eight months.

Sources of Worker Power

All along, the *daladala* workers have possessed potential 'structural power' since the buses that they operate constitute the cheapest (though still barely affordable) means of motorised public transport. But for years they had lacked any 'associational power' to advance their common interests.



A Typical Bus Stop in Dar es Salaam

Source: M. Rizzo

This status began to change in 1997 when a handful of bus drivers and conductors banded together to form their own informal workers' association called UWAMADAR. In Swahili this acronym stands for 'Umoja Wa Madereva na Makondakta Wa Mabasi ya Abiria (Daladala) Mkoa wa Dar es Salaam'.

From the outset, the association's main goal was the regulation of the insecure employment relationship in the sector. Once formed, the association sought out the help of COTWUT, the Tanzania Communication and Transport Workers Union.

Though initial relations between the two organisations were not easy, COTWUT eventually helped the *daladala* workers to formally establish their association. By April 2000, UWAMADAR was officially registered as an autonomous workers' association as well as a branch of COTWUT.

After gaining legal status and securing some resources to organise, UWAMADAR turned its attention to recruiting members—seemingly a very daunting task. Initially it focused on identifying its potential leaders at individual stations or along certain bus routes, and educating them about its broad mission and concrete goals. Despite many difficulties, by 2003 this workers' association boasted over 5,200 members.

Securing a Contract

The Coalition of UWAMADAR and COTWUT pushed for collective bargaining in order to achieve their demands at the same time that they supported wildcat strikes and localised walk-outs of workers. This two-pronged strategy was based partly on recognising that there was a large oversupply of unskilled workers in the transport sector eager to take the jobs of any striking union workers.

Hence, these workers also relied on getting the government involved to deal directly with DARCOBOA, the Tanzania association of bus owners/employers. Faced with widespread workers' unrest that threatened to disrupt the city's transportation, the government put pressure on DARCOBOA to negotiate an agreement with the transport workers.

After extended negotiations, especially on the issue of contracts, a collective agreement between the two sides became legally binding in March 2004. This agreement spelled out the employee-employer relationship in the sector, including the wage level, the official daily working hours and even the workers' entitlement to holidays.

Enforcement Problems

Despite the victory of securing a labour contract, there were ensuing problems with its enforcement. One drawback was the contract's employer-inspired specification of necessary skills for drivers and conductors, which many of the relatively uneducated workers did not possess.

Also, the extremely rapid turnover of workers in the sector tended to weaken the workers' organisation. Moreover, while the government supported the collective-bargaining process, it exerted little effort to ensure its enforcement. The workers' Coalition responded by pushing for a stronger intermediary role for the government.

For example, it lobbied for the government's newly-established Sea and Maritime Transport Regulating Authority to compel the bus owners to provide evidence of individual workers' contracts before issuing them with a passenger transport license. Finally, in 2009, after strenuous efforts by the Coalition, the government adopted this recommendation.

The Main Lessons

What are the most important lessons that can be learned from the struggles of Tanzania's bus transport workers? Since the events analysed in this paper are context-specific, they cannot be specifically replicated.

But a number of general lessons can be derived about the actors involved (namely, African workers in the informal economy who partner with a trade union), as well as about the goals that workers' political mobilisation can hope to achieve in increasingly liberalised and informalised economies.

The first lesson from the Tanzanian struggle is about process: realising 'associational power' can entail a slow effort at constructing a common ground between informal workers and their union counterpart. The leadership of informal workers was key to the success of their political organisation. At the same time—and contrary again to widespread skepticism—trade unions can make a positive contribution to this effort.

Second, it is important to take a political economy approach when analysing workers' organisation in the informal economy. Making sense of why and how workers mobilise politically must start from locating them within their economic contexts, identifying their specific links to employers and mapping the sources of both their precariousness and their power.

For example, a key strength on which bus transport workers in Dar es Salaam drew was their capacity to critically affect mass transportation in Tanzania's capital through threats of strikes and other forms of protest.

The third general lesson is that there are problems with the widely held belief that collective action by organised (or organising) informal workers for their rights at work belongs only to the past.

Transport workers in Dar es Salaam did lack a clear employment relationship to their employers—the main characteristic that is alleged to prevent workers from effective mobilising in the informal economy. Yet the struggle of these workers achieved significant step towards formalising their employment relationship with the bus owners.

It is thus important in each instance to concretely identify 'the realm of the possible' for each group of workers in a particular economic sector and country. But, above all, it is critical to place the character of ongoing labour struggles at the centre of reflections on the potential for effective political action by precarious workers.

Reference

Rizzo, Matteo (2013). 'Informalisation and the End of Trade Unionism as We Knew It? Dissenting Remarks from a Tanzanian Case Study.' *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 40, No. 136, pp. 290-308.
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