

ITF Youth Summer School – International Trade Union History Workshop Report

GLI Manchester has launched a programme on the history of the international trade union movement, funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). As part of the project, GLI Manchester was invited to run a workshop at the International Transport Workers' Federation's (ITF) Youth Summer School in Sheffield on 19th July 2022. The school was held at Wortley Hall, a British stately home owned by a workers' cooperative, and focused on organising in the platform economy. The GLI session explored the history of trade unions and informal workers, focused around four themes:

1. The history of trade unions and processes of formalisation
2. The way informal workers organise
3. Barriers to organising informal workers
4. The power of informal workers in the labour movement

The session opened with a brief overview of the concept of informal work. It was noted that work can be thought of as a spectrum of employment conditions and relationships that has at one end - full time, decent and productive employment, access to social protection, and respect for labour standards. At the other end are the worst forms of informal employment - extremely low income, bad working conditions, no security, denial of basic rights. It has been the historic purpose of the labour movement to push working conditions and rights away from informality.



Despite the sweltering heat, attendees played an active role in shaping the session.

Trade Unions & Formalisation

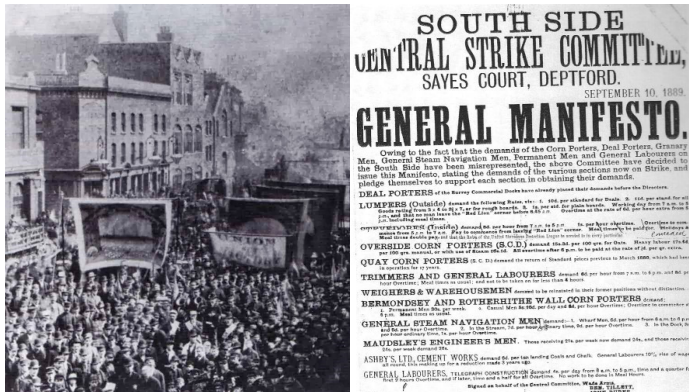
Participants were asked about their own unions' origins. Participants talked about the origins of 3F among bricklayers in Denmark, rigidly controlled and but ineffectively protected by the old guilds system. We heard about the Canadian Postal Workers who organised to reject military-style discipline from ex-officer managers. Members from the IWGB talked about the emergence of their union from a campaign for justice by migrant cleaners in London.

GLI then gave the example of the emergence of Unite the Union in the UK, from the 1889 Great Docks Strike, which saw casual and informal labourers unite with permanent workers for better pay and an end to dehumanising treatment. It was highlighted that all unions were founded by informal workers facing limited rights, brutal treatment, and poor conditions.

Organisation of Informal Workers

Participants then discussed the different kinds of networks and organisations they had encountered among informal workers. In Copenhagen, litter-pickers, largely refugees from Africa, have formed a network which meets at the Folket Hus to campaign against police violence. Brazilian Deliveroo workers in the UK share advice on visa issues, offer crash-space, and promote campaigns over

WhatsApp. In New York, unlicensed street food vendors, many of whom are undocumented migrants, have begun campaigns to end punitive fines and to call on the city to grant them licenses.



The session then turned to look at historic examples of boiler-makers in the UK who set up societies to help members with costs of sickness and funerals (and liquor for the meetings), *gremios* in Philippines which began as mutual aid societies under Spanish colonial rule, but which organised strikes and even military uprisings, and the Workers Affairs Association, one of the first Sudanese unions, which was born out of a network of railway school

graduates who organised sports games together. It was highlighted that wherever workers are informal, there is organisation- even if it's not a part of a union!

Barriers to Organising

The session then turned to look at some of the challenges faced when organising informal workers. Drawing from their own experiences of organising amongst precarious and informal workers, it was noted that sometimes wages are so low that it is hard for potential members to pay subs (although we later reflected that maybe due to existing organisation, sometimes it is hard for them to see what the value of paying subs would be), sometimes a high turnover of workers makes it difficult to build relationships with individuals, sometimes people on low wages or in legally precarious positions are afraid to rock the boat and just want some stability.

GLI highlighted the example of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, which had to overcome hostility to their members due to their gender, the fact that they didn't share an employer, and their speaking out against caste discrimination. However, this also led to new and creative forms of campaigning, including the establishment of cooperatives, literacy programmes, and important advocacy at the local, national, and international level. Another example given was the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), that formed the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations to support the organisation of informal workers. Due to difficulties related to collecting membership, ZCTU decided that informal workers would be associate members, not full members.

The Power of Informal Workers

Finally, participants examined the power of informal workers and talked about transformations of unions they'd seen and heard about, as well as the benefits of organising amongst informal workers. Participants from 3F highlighted that they have had to campaign and organise more dynamically and creatively to develop new ways of reaching and representing workers rather than relying on the servicing model. Some participants pointed out that the diversity and representation within the union movement could be vastly improved by reaching out to the informal sector. This could make further inroads among communities that are often left out. Others highlighted that ending poor conditions among informal workers would protect conditions for those workers who were already in formal employment and prevent a race-to-the-bottom.



GLI then gave the example of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU) in Uganda, which had faced years of decline in the face of privatisation and deregulation, but who grew substantially in size and organising power after turning to a policy of recruiting entire associations of informal workers, rather than recruiting on a one-by-one basis.

The session closed with a reflection on some of the key ideas that had been discussed:

- **All workers were once informal.**
- **Informal workers are organised.**
- **These organisations are often key to overcoming barriers.**
- **Unions are strengthened by the inclusion of informal workers.**

Participants reflected on the lessons that they had learnt and began to consider how they could be applied to their own organisations. This included discussions of whether the IWGB could work to affiliate other associations and networks? Can the ITF set up a section for affiliate members in the platform economy? These questions were being discussed even after the meeting, and participants decided that they should speak with people with direct experience to try and take on board their perspectives.

GLI encouraged participants to play an active role in shaping future drafts of the text and offered participants the opportunity to organise further sessions.