



Organising Vulnerable Workers: Comparing India, South Africa and Ghana

Report on First Workshop, Johannesburg, 2-4 December 2013

Arguably the greatest challenge facing the labour movement in the age of globalization is organizing the growing number of vulnerable workers, including those in the informal economy. Indeed, a range of contemporary scholars, most notably Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume 1* and Guy Standing in his book, *Work after Globalisation: Building Occupational Citizenship*, have concluded that the labour movement has no future. What emerged from our three day workshop on 2nd to 4th December is the growing scepticism towards traditional trade unionism as new forms of worker organisation, strategies and sources of power emerge. In India, for example, union membership has increased by nearly 500% as informal workers take advantage of electoral competition amongst multiple parties to promote their demands. In South Africa, we see the re-emergence of worker advice offices such as the Casual Workers Advice Office in Germiston in the industrial heartland in response to the inability of traditional unions to respond to the needs of vulnerable workers.

This raises the question as to whether this shift to new forms of organization and sources of power will revitalize the existing movement, a process of transformation from within. Or will it lead to the formation of a new worker movement, as happened with the CIO industrial unions in the USA some 80 years ago, with different strategies, different political values and different political subjects? As Jennifer Chun suggests in *The Power of the Powerless*, "There is a growing interest in a new political subject of labour... women, immigrants, people of colour, low-paid service workers, precarious workers ... Groups that have been historically excluded from the moral and material boundaries of union membership... Rather than traditional scholarship on industrial relations, new labour scholars are exploring transformations occurring at the periphery of mainstream labour movements" (2012: 40).

In the first phase of this international collaborative research project (2010-2012) we identified the new spaces being created in India, Brazil and South Africa as vulnerable workers faced insecure forms of work, cross-border migration, a lack of caring institutions and environmental degradation (Fakier, K and Emke, E (Eds). 2014. *Socio-economic Insecurity in Emerging Economies: Building New Spaces*, London: Routledge). This volume is to be launched at the ICDD annual conference in Kassel in July 2014.

The aim of the second phase of the research (2013-2014) is to deepen these findings in two directions: firstly, to identify and analyse the organizational forms, strategies and sources of power that are emerging amongst vulnerable workers in India, Ghana and South Africa; and secondly, to identify ways in which the voice of these workers can be heard and their wages and working conditions improved.

The workshop benefitted enormously from the active participation of members of COSATU's Vulnerable Workers Task Team (VWTT). The VWTT shared with us the pamphlet that forms part of their campaign to

organize vulnerable workers. The preamble states, “All workers are vulnerable. Workers are vulnerable to dismissal, to bad health and safety conditions, and to pay that does not meet their needs. But some workers are more vulnerable than others... Workers who are working in isolated situations (such as domestic workers, farm workers and workers in very small companies), or are self-employed are extra vulnerable. In addition, restructuring means that the modern workplace often has multiple employers in one workplace because of outsourcing, sub-contracting and the use of labour brokers. And a large number of workers are no longer on permanent full time contracts. Fixed term contracts and part-time employment is becoming common in many sectors, especially service sectors... Migrant workers from other countries are also vulnerable as they often do not know their rights and are super-exploited. Young women in all sectors are vulnerable because they are exposed to high levels of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace” (COSATU, Join the drive to organize all Vulnerable Workers!).

Put differently, vulnerable jobs are the opposite of decent work. They are jobs that involve:

- very few employment opportunities
- low and irregular wages
- little or no job security
- unsafe workplaces
- Little or no benefits
- long working hours which impacts negatively on work-life balance
- little or no protection against unfair dismissal
- no protection against unfair discrimination – gender, race, religion, age.
- No trade union representation – not covered by collective bargaining

The Commission on Vulnerable Work in the UK defines a vulnerable worker as “someone working in an environment where the risk of being denied employment rights is high and who does not have the capacity or means to protect themselves from that abuse”. What do we mean by organizing? Organising in this context is defined as a process of bringing workers together for the purpose of promoting their rights and interests, to fight exploitation, enhance their bargaining power to improve their working conditions, , and to promote solidarity among workers within and across national boundaries.

PRESENTATIONS AT THE 2013 WORKSHOP

Organising vulnerable workers in Ghana

The Oil Plantation Value Chain, Akua Britwum and Angela Akorsu, Institute of Development Studies, Cape Coast University

Organising Vulnerable Workers in India

- Tea Plantation Workers, Sharit Bhowmik, Tata Institute of Social Science
- Workers in Small Tea Gardens, Virginius Xaxa, Tata Institute of Social Science
- Home Based Workers, Indira Gartenberg, Tata Institute of Social Science
- Street Vendors, Debdulal Saha, Tata Institute of Social Science

Organising Vulnerable Workers in South Africa

- A Trade Union Perspective, Jane Barret, Chair of Cosatu Task Team on Organising Vulnerable Workers

- Organizing Waste Pickers in South Africa: Some Lessons from the Global Experience, Melanie Samson, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)
- Organising waste pickers in Johannesburg, Carmen Ludwig and Edward Webster, SWOP
- Cleaners at OR Tambo International Airport, Johannesburg, Rob Rees, Naledi
- The Horticultural Value Chain in Gauteng, Mbuso Nkosi, Global Labour University
- Dynamics of Strike Mobilisation and Organisation amongst Farmworkers in the Western Cape, Jesse Wilderman, Global Labour University

In the final session we began to draw out the similarities and differences between Ghana, India and South Africa and began to develop a research agenda for the future.

Six issues emerged when we compared Ghana, India and South Africa:

1. Unions and informal work
2. Migrant labour
3. Alternative types of organization and sources of power
4. Gender
5. The Land Question
6. Research methodology

1. Unions and informal work

The need to look critically at the role of trade unions in relation to informal work; unions have not clearly defined informal work as work; new types of organisations have to be developed - even in the formal sector there is a lot of vulnerability (airports, plantation workers); Informal workers sceptical about traditional unions ability to deliver on the grievances of informal workers (argued that waste pickers were sceptical of formalisation of their organisation); different forms of informal organising and different forms of informal economy work: India highly informalized, South Africa moving from formal to informal, Ghana somewhere in between. How did informal workers or vulnerable workers set up new organisations, get off the ground, become sustainable, and operate? Need to look at the details.

2. Migrant labour

Role of migrant workers (many of the sectors involve migrants) in all three countries; conflict between migrant and local workers; challenge of making the invisible, visible - linked to identity and confidence; slightly contradictory issue came through about autonomy (subjugation of some and autonomy of others); the question of targeted organising strategies (understand the specifics of both location and sectors of workers); horizontal linkages between workers of different sectors.

3. Alternative types of organization and sources of power

Need to have alternative types of organisations like co-ops (they exist because unions support them); unless you change the structure of land holding, hard to change society but if get land makes people more independent; presence of NGOs in India while more unions in South Africa and Ghana; Questions about organisational strategies - direct recruitment into trade unions or through associations? Changing sources of power - media comes out very strongly in Ghana and South Africa, and distinctions were drawn between old and new media; need to know more about the industries, supply chains, and interaction of all the players? Looking at value may be the end of a particular kind of organisation but not the end of working people coming together in some sort of organisational form, figuring out strategies (new and old), leads to a new political subject of labour.

4. Gender

Gender dimension has come up for everyone (women dominant in informal economy); issues over identity; how these are shaped and how these identities play a role in organising.

5. The Land Question

Differences in the political and legal systems in the three countries were identified -Ghana has more formal systems but in India focused on informal economy; In South Africa, land dispossession was a system of violent dispossession of land (not just hostility but violence on farms); in Ghana and India indigenous people have access to land as peasant farmers; also in South Africa we have destruction of indigenous culture (particularly imposition on food, clothing, etc. through the migrant labour system); What would land redistribution mean as a solution for agricultural workers? What kind of stake can we give agricultural workers that might move us in this direction? What are implications for issues of ownership for agricultural workers? (Landlessness increases vulnerability)

6. Research methodology

Build capacity of the movement to be able to do research and mix together with organisers in trade unions. How to integrate into the program of the union? How do workers serve as researchers? (Research and development groups in NUMSA - researchers working directly with members to map their industry); Methods and Capacity - what capacity currently exists, what models of research are they using (SACTWU, NUMSA, COSATU has a policy department of five people); even as we explore what capacity exists, we should be building a participatory approach, start to sensitise a layer of leaders that workers are their own source of information, encourage and unleash capacity of workers to inform our organising strategies; The methodology followed is predominantly ethnographic, drawing on the experiences of vulnerable workers through in-depth interviews, observation, and in some cases, large scale surveys. We believe that this is the most authentic way of uncovering the invisible world of the informal economy and vulnerable work.

2nd WORKSHOP IN GHANA, AUGUST 2014

I suggest we frame the workshop around the presentations made in December 2013. I will leave the final decision to Akua Britwum but I would like to propose that we structure the workshop around the theme of precarious work in rural and urban areas and that we have written abstracts by mid-July so that we can discuss written draft papers at the workshop.

1. Introduction

A conceptual and theoretical introduction: Organising Vulnerable Workers in India, Ghana and South Africa, Akua Britwum, Sharit Bhowmik and Edward Webster

The challenge of organising vulnerable workers: A trade union perspective, Jane Barrett

2. Rural Workers

- Tea Plantation Workers in India, Sharit Bhowmik
- The Oil Plantation Value Chain in Nigeria, Akua Britwum
- Small Holders and Outgrowers: The Case of Ghana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU), Angela Akorsu
- Organising Vulnerable Horticultural Workers in Gauteng, South Africa, Mbuso Nkosi
- Dynamics of Strike Mobilization and its Impact on Organisation amongst Wine Farm Workers in the Western Cape, South Africa, Jesse Wilderman

3. Urban Workers

- Street Vendors in Mumbai, Debdulal Saha
- Home –based Workers in Mumbai, Indira Gartenberg
- Waste Pickers in Johannesburg, Melanie Samson
- Municipal Workers in Johannesburg, Edward Webster and Carmen Ludwig
- Organising Cleaners at O R Tambo Airport, Rob Rees

Edward Webster

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