

Contesting Digital Technology through New Forms of Transnational Activism

Edward Webster and Carmen Ludwig
University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

ABSTRACT

While the tech giants are using privatisation to present themselves as providers of solutions to global problems, digitalisation is creating new forms of transnational activism. Global unions are emerging as players in this contest, helping to build counter power at both the local and global level. Through a comparison of the use of digital technology in two case studies in Africa involving two different global unions the article demonstrates how global unions can, through their intermediary coordinating role at the supranational level, deepen worker power.

KEYWORDS

Global unions; digital technology; informal work; power resources; union revitalisation

A “new corporation movement” has emerged; it believes that by reimagining capitalism business can simultaneously pursue profit and bring prosperity and well-being to society as a whole (Henderson, 2020). Bakan (2020: 91) demonstrates how corporations are tapping into new markets while framing this as an engagement for the public good. From this perspective, technology is regarded as an integral part of the solution to global problems.

Tech giants such as Uber, Amazon and Google are examples of corporations that have gained unprecedented levels of power in the age of digitalisation. Their business model is based on a new form of algorithmic control where “workers” are monitored indirectly, managed through online platforms and expected to produce measurable outputs (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). This presents the labour movement with a challenge: on the one hand, it deepens the exploitation of labour on a global scale, while on the other hand, it is leading to opportunities for organisational innovation through new forms of transnational labour activism. Labour scholars began in the 1980s and 1990s to describe these new forms of grassroots mobilisation and campaigning as a “new internationalism”, distinguishing it from the “old internationalism” of the established unions of the North which was seen as a form of “trade union diplomacy” (Munck, 2002: 135–53).¹ By examining how digital technology changes the workplace and how it is appropriated by workers and their unions, we will demonstrate that the use of digital technology is increasingly contested and that trade unions have found innovative ways to respond to the challenge of new technologies with the support of their global union federations (GUFs). We show how GUFs are emerging as important players in the labour movement, facilitating local unions’ resistance and contesting the power of

¹ See Brookes’ (2019: 6) important qualification on “the transition from the old to the new”, which she says “has been neither clear cut nor homogenizing across the labour movement”.

global corporations.

At the centre of our argument is that the new technologies driving these corporations are not neutral: they are “embedded in meanings, ideologies and power” (Kenny, 2021: 135). To illustrate the ways in which technology is socially embedded we have chosen two cases where transnational activism by GUFs has affected unions in different ways. Drawing on the power resources approach (PRA), we explore two different responses to technological changes. The first is Bridge International Academies (BIA), where technology has been used to deprofessionalise teachers in Kenya and Uganda and to undermine education unions. Second is the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers’ Union (ATGWU) in Uganda, which is attempting to develop its own app to compete with Uber and other powerful global tech giants. In the first case transnational activism was drawn on to resist an attempt to undermine the union through new technology; in the second case transnational activism facilitated the use of digital technology to strengthen the union.

Between 2019 and 2021 four interviews were conducted by the authors with representatives from the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), ATGWU and an informal taxi driver from Kampala and three interviews with union leaders of Education International (EI), the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) and the Uganda National Teachers’ Union (UNATU).² In addition, we draw on the empirical research that has been conducted by EI and its affiliates on the effects of BIA on the education sector in various countries (EI and KNUT, 2016; Riep and Machacek, 2016; Riep 2019; Unterhalter, Robinson and Ibrahim, 2018).

Global Unions and the Power Resources Approach

The power resources approach has emerged as an organisational tool to rebuild labour (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018, 2019). We distinguish between four union power resources: associational, structural, societal and institutional power (Schmalz et al., 2018). While associational power derives from the formation of collective workers’ organisations, structural power reflects the status of specific groups in the economic system or in the labour market. Unions can mobilise societal power by appealing to notions of social justice, which can be expressed in two ways: by building coalitions with other social groups such as social movements or community-based organisations and by influencing the public discourse. Institutional power derives from previous workers’ struggles and gains that have become more permanent, such as laws and collective bargaining agreements.

The intellectual foundations of the PRA were laid over two decades ago by two American Marxist sociologists, Erik Olin Wright (2000) and Beverly Silver (2003). The two key concepts – structural power (the power stemming from labour’s position in the economic system and production process) and associational power (the power arising from the formation of collective workers’ organisations) – provided the basis for this approach. Silver (2003) argues that weaknesses in structural power might encourage experiments with new forms and ways to strengthen workers’ associational power. In the decade that followed, labour scholars went on to identify two other sources of workers’ power, first societal power (or symbolic power, see Chun, 2009), and then institutional power (Dörre, Holst and Nachtwey, 2009).

The PRA highlights the possibility of worker agency in the face of globalisation processes and

² Except for one, all interviews had to be conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the limitations involved, this had no negative effects on the research process.

established routines. However, the PRA has been subject to critique. Some academics argue that it is not a universal formula and has to be situated in an analysis of the relationship between capital and labour (Gallas, 2018; Runciman, 2019). It is a tool that can be utilised to understand and build worker organisation. But, as we emphasise, context matters (Schmalz et al., 2019). For example, while institutional power can guarantee trade unions' rights such as freedom of association and participation in labour-market and conflict-resolution institutions, it also restricts unions' capacity, creating a frame that constrains trade union strategies and actions. Therefore, institutional power is dependent on context and labour's political traditions. Power is also relational and depends on the strength and strategies of the opposite party, as argued by Brookes (2018: 254).

The PRA and its relevance for the revitalisation of labour has been the subject of an ongoing debate in the *Global Labour Journal*. While several case studies demonstrate that innovative forms of organisation are emerging as workers identify and conceptualise new sources of power – for example in the informal sector (Kumar and Singh, 2018; Spooner and Mwanika, 2018) – so far little attention has been paid to the role of GUFs and their effect on workers' power (for an exception see Birelma, 2018).

Global unions are “coordinating bodies” between their national affiliates, linking them to international institutions (Croucher and Cotton, 2009: 8). As Schmalz, Conrow et al. (2021: 145-146) argue, the “GUFs are rather a form of comparatively weak supranational workers' power” in the sense that their associational and structural power is interdependent with that of their union affiliates. However, GUFs can exert some *institutional power*, for instance by engaging with multinational cooperation and the conclusion of Global Framework Agreements, and *societal power* by engaging with social movements and civil society organisation. Instead of constituting an independent source of power, the power of global unions lies in their transnational character and their ability to connect different spatial levels of union action, as Ford and Gillan (2021) argue. The GUFs can “combine different kinds of power resources simultaneously at different scales” (Ford and Gillan 2021: 310; see also Brookes, 2013). It is the strength of GUFs to reinforce the actions of the member organisations and to escalate these from a local to an international context. Fichter and colleagues conclude:

Today's globalised world impacts workers and their unions ever more directly, so that the need for transnational cooperation in defending themselves at home, i.e. linking the local with the global, is growing. In some cases, local associational power is bolstered through the transnational resources provided by global unions. In other cases, local unions have found support outside their country in the societal power of allied consumer groups and social movements. And there are transnational union initiatives that use their institutional power to strengthen their cross-border interest representation with governments (Fichter et al., 2018: 7).

However, coordinating the different levels of transnational union activism is a challenge. A top-down approach which does not pay sufficient attention to the local context can produce dysfunctional results; this can also be the case for decentralised activities without a coordinating centre (Fischer, 2021: 373; Nowak 2021: 313). GUFs have to rely on the capability of intermediation – that is, developing a collective interest from conflicting demands and approaches (Lévesque and Murray, 2010.: 341ff).

Fischer (2021), in similar ways to Munck (2002) cited earlier, goes on to differentiate between two streams of research on transnational labour activism. The first focuses on global structures of the trade union movement and on “governance struggles” (McCallum, 2013: 13–15) in global

production networks that aim at the transnational regulation of employment relations. The second stream centres on advocacy networks and campaigns with a “broader political, social and environmental agenda” (Fischer, 2021: 372) and on grassroots mobilisation and the recruitment of (non-unionised) workers. Fischer argues that this form of activism is often a challenge to the established trade unions of the North.

Our case studies fall into this latter stream but provide examples of how global unions are challenging the power of global corporations through campaigns and experimentation with new forms of organisation. In Part One we demonstrate how, through Education International, global labour built societal power and became a key driver of a campaign against the privatisation of education. In Part Two we show how the International Transport Workers’ Federation found ways of challenging tech companies in Uganda through innovative ways of building associational power.

Part One:

Challenging Privatisation of Education

The McDonaldisation of education

The business model of Bridge International Academies is designed to provide education for the poor by selling low-priced products to low-income people and framing it as an engagement for the public good. “We take lessons from global service providers, like McDonald’s or Starbucks. We build to scale, we systemize, we standardize. We call this vertically integrated platform, our ‘Academy in a Box’”, Shannon May, BIA’s co-founder, remarked in an interview (cited in Bakan, 2020: 122). The new digital technology is at the centre of this business model. As co-founder Jay Kimmelman explained, the technology allows for “word-for-word, action-by-action scripts delivered in real time to Android-based tablets” (cited in Bakan, 2020: 122).

Concerned with the impact of this McDonaldisation of the learning process. EI conducted studies in Kenya (EI and KNUT, 2016) and Uganda (Riep and Machacek, 2016) where BIA had expanded rapidly. EI’s studies found that BIA services are of poor quality, inaccessible for the very poor and disadvantaged, and ultimately unaffordable for most families in the communities in which it operates (see also RESULTS, 2017; Riep, 2019: 7–9). Private companies like BIA represent a direct challenge to public education with this form of low-fee, for-profit provision which is openly marketed as an alternative to public schools, often framed in the rhetoric of “parental choice” (Zuilkowski et al., 2018). EI’s studies demonstrate that the “teacher computers” allow BIA to hire low-paid and often under-qualified individuals who transmit scripted instructions to pupils. In Kenya, more than 70 per cent of BIA teachers were found to be insufficiently qualified (EI and KNUT 2016: 23).

BIA teachers are forced to use a scripted curriculum developed in the United States instead of the local curriculum, which raises questions about whether this approach constitutes a form of re-colonisation of education in Africa through global capital. As teachers have to follow the lessons from tablets, they have little or no autonomy to adapt to the learning needs of students or to influence teaching practices and the curriculum. Many teachers questioned the quality of the instructions and materials found on the “teacher computers”. At least 46.7 per cent of the teachers argued that following the scripted curriculum did not always work and that it was not effective for

helping learners to understand target concepts (EI and KNUT, 2016: 35). If teachers did not follow the tablet instructions, they usually had to hide this practice from BIA.

As a KNUT representative explained:

The teachers never went to college; there were just people picked and trained for a few weeks. They were not allowed to teach the Kenyan Curriculum; they were receiving instructions from US early in the morning, through their tablets and that's what they are told to teach. And if you deviate from that teaching they deduct your salary for the day instantly, and in most circumstances teachers were sacked (KNUT Representative, interview, 2021).

The crucial point is that new digital technology is being used by BIA to de-professionalise teachers and to cut costs drastically by substituting qualified teachers with unqualified staff. In addition, the working conditions of teachers at BIA schools are characterised by low salaries, high workload, long hours, and a lack of job security and benefits. Accordingly, BIA teachers did not perceive their contracts as fair (EI and KNUT, 2016: 22–32).

The commodification of education takes different forms, with private school chains for the poor being one expression. It is expected that in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the push for online learning, corporations – including Google, Facebook and Apple – will gain even more influence in the expanding education technology (EdTech) market in the future (Bakan, 2020: 124; Marachi and Carpenter, 2020; Williamson and Hogan, 2020). In the view of EI,

It depends a lot on how technologies are used. It's not inherently bad as long as they are used appropriately. But the way it is prescribed by Bridge, it de-professionalises and de-humanises teachers. ... We have also learned from the pandemic that technology cannot replace teachers (EI Representative, interview, 2021).

The Global Response Campaign

Founded in 1993, EI is a global union federation that represents 32 million education personnel organised in 383 trade unions from 178 countries.³ In 2015, EI started its Global Response Campaign against the privatisation of education and a focus on BIA.⁴ Its aim has been to “develop a global response strategy to ensure governments fulfil their obligation to free, quality public education and counter the influence of private actors in education, especially where their activities in education have a negative impact on access and exacerbate inequities within education systems” (EI, 2015: n.p.).

The campaign achieved some successes. In 2020, the World Bank's private sector arm, the International Financial Corporation (IFC), decided to freeze any investments in private, for-profit K–12 schools. In March 2022, the IFC (2022) exited its investment in NewGlobe Schools, Inc., the parent company of BIA. The policy shift by the IFC was a major achievement as the World Bank Group's private sector lending arm had promoted private education providers as an important area for its investment policy. The IFC had invested more than US\$10 million in BIA operations in Africa. EI (2022) welcomed the decision by the IFC and called on other investors to follow.

³ <https://www.ei-ie.org>

⁴ The Global Response Campaign formed part of a larger campaign run by the EI, the Unite for Quality Education Campaign.

An important starting point for the campaign's activities was research that shed light on the extent of privatisation in selected countries and the level of involvement of private education companies. The aim is to assist the federation and its members to gain knowledge, to raise public awareness on the privatisation of education and its impact on national education systems, and to inform the campaign strategy in each country. An EI representative from the Africa region described the strategy as follows:

In Africa, the campaign has already contributed a lot to the fight against the privatisation of education. Studies are first conducted in the different countries to better understand the events and contexts regarding the privatisation of education. Then campaigns are developed based on these findings (EI Representative, interview, 2021).

The global union federation played an important role in building the capacity of local unions by facilitating the transfer of knowledge and mutual learning. A representative from KNUT (Interview, 2021) highlights that the campaign in Kenya first “started through cross-border solidarity” when EI organised meetings with other education unions in Liberia, Nigeria and Uganda to learn from their experiences.

The campaign simultaneously combined global, regional and local union advocacy activities. In Kenya, KNUT initially started to create awareness among union members and to “organise from below”. The union used the annual general meetings of its 110 branches across the country to get school representatives and union members involved in the anti-privatisation campaign. The involvement of members also helped to locate Bridge schools. In a second step, parents and communities were informed that BIA is “not serving the needs of the poor” (KNUT Representative, interview, 2021).⁵ The union also approached parents from government schools; many felt that the existence of BIA threatened the existence of these schools.

Both unions located the campaign in the broader picture of defending public education and to advocate for an increase in funding for public schools. As the representative from UNATU explains:

It was not only focusing on the fight against Bridge, but it was about looking at education as a whole and as a right, where children of school-going age should attain quality education (UNATU Representative, interview, 2021).

In Kenya and Uganda, the campaign centrally included an engagement with members of parliament and governments, whom the unions found to be responsive. In Kenya, the Minister of Education at the time started an inspection of the infrastructure of BIA schools, which mainly consists of “only corrugated metal sheets, with no windows and wire mesh” (KNUT Representative, interview, 2021). Concerns about safety issues increased when a non-BIA school with a similar infrastructure in Nairobi collapsed and killed at least seven children in 2019, and another audit was initiated by government. The audit found that three quarters of BIA schools did not meet safety and infrastructure standards (KNUT Representative, interview, 2021).

In both countries, BIA was deemed an illegal operator by the courts following action by education authorities (Riep, 2019: 14). In Kenya, 26 out of 45 BIA schools had to close (KNUT

⁵ According to BIA, the school model serves poor families who live on US\$2 a day or less. Research findings demonstrate that the real costs for parents far outreaches the \$6 per month of school fees as claimed by BIA (Riep, 2019: 7–8; see also Unterhalter, Robinson and Ibrahim, 2018).

Representative, interview, 2021). In Uganda, BIA has been prohibited from opening other schools in the country. It is not clear how many of the initially existing 63 schools are currently in operation, which is regarded by the UNATU representative as a violation of the court ruling and an illegal practice.

Both education unions share the opinion that the EI's campaign has made an important contribution to the fight against privatisation in their countries. Besides research and the dissemination of knowledge on BIA and other for-profit education providers, the involvement of the global union federation was crucial in reinforcing the actions of the member organisations and escalating these from a local to an international context. This reflects the fact that education companies operate globally and that education financing is also partly steered through multilateral institutions.

On the international level, the campaign was successful in creating sustained pressure on governments, education corporations and international financial institutions. As a stakeholder in multilateral institutions such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE),⁶ EI also had some institutional leverage to support its demands.

Particularly relevant in the struggle against the commodification of education has been the global union federation's ability to draw on *societal power* by influencing the public discourse and by building alliances with civil society organisations. First, the federation was able to gain attention through issue-setting. The exposure of the negative effects of privatisation on education, and BIA's operating model in particular, received a high media response – both locally and internationally. As with other brands, BIA's business model depends on a good public image – even more so when it comes to providing public goods.⁷

Equally important, the struggle against commercialisation was located within the broader aim of promoting access to quality and free public education worldwide, highlighting it as an issue of equity and democracy. This provided a strong frame, which also resonated with other civil society organisations. Their broader involvement was important to build pressure. In 2018, the human rights organisation, the East African Centre for Human Rights (EACHRights), filed a complaint with the World Bank's Compliance Advisor to document grievances in BIA schools in Kenya, to which the World Bank responded by initiating further investigations (Adick, 2020: 273). Since 2015, civil society organisations have written an annual open letter to investors, donor agencies and the World Bank urging them to stop funding BIA. This included the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), an alliance between EI and civil society organisations. The 2019 letter to the World Bank and its donors was signed by 173 organisations; it stated:

We call on all donors and the World Bank Group itself to take a clear and principled position in support of free, publicly provided education and against the use of development aid to fund for-profit or commercial education (Civil Society Organisations, 2019).

⁶ GPE is a multi-stakeholder platform that aims to strengthen education systems in developing countries, including governments, civil society organisations, education unions and the private sector. The World Bank Group is a partner, and supervises some of the GPE-funded projects. The World Bank has played a highly ambivalent role in its position towards school fees and private education institutions (for an overview see RESULTS, 2017: 10–17).

⁷ This is also reflected by the fact that BIA has been quick to respond to international criticism, particularly by civil society organisations, but also by the level of intimidation reported by researchers and trade unionists (KNUT, Interview, 2021; Riep and Machacek, 2016).

These initiatives were further supported through protest actions in front of the World Bank and Pearson's, the world's largest education company and an investor in BIA. The protests also involved civil society and EI's member organisations internationally. As the EI representative explains:

We have also mobilised other stakeholders, especially civil society partners, like members of the Global Campaign for Education in Africa or members of the regional network, African Network Campaign on Education for All. It is about bringing all these partners together and putting pressure on governments. There is a need to expose what is going wrong at the national and global levels. There also needs to be global pressure on the World Bank, as the funder of BIA (EI Representative, interview, 2021).

We turn now to an examination of how digital technology is contested in the transport sector in Uganda, but also how it is used to strengthen workers' associational power.

Part Two:

Challenging Tech Companies in the Transport Sector⁸

Building organisation in challenging times through union apps

Uganda's Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union faced a near collapse of membership in the 1980s, when liberalisation undermined the public transport sector through the introduction of structural adjustment programmes and privatisation. The older public transport companies, where ATGWU had its stronghold, collapsed. It also led to the informalisation of the transport sector and the rise of the informal minibuses and motorcycle taxis (known locally as boda boda); in Kampala alone about 250 000 boda boda riders form part of the transport sector (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018: 151, 159). The ATGWU made a strategic decision to organise the growing numbers of boda boda riders.

The decision was influenced by the launch in 2013 of an informal transport workers project by the International Transport Workers Federation and their willingness to assist ATGWU to organise informal workers (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018; Schminke and Fridell, 2021). A crucial feature of these workers was that they were already organised – not into a trade union, but through credit and savings cooperatives, informal self-help groups, community-based organisations and, most importantly, associations. ATGWU did not try to recruit individual informal workers but undertook a process of discussions with these associations, eventually affiliating each association as a whole into the union (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018). The union had to find new ways to respond to informal workers whose status and identity ranged between being a worker, self-employed or a small business holder (Webster et al., 2021: 6). A female informal driver explains her work experience in these terms:

I am a taxi driver, a minibus of fourteen seaters. I drive for the whole day, from Monday to Friday. The boss, who works for an insurance company, owns the minibus. ... On Saturdays, I ride a boda

⁸ In this section, we draw on a joint article with Dave Spooner from the Global Labour Institute, who has conducted extensive research on the transport sector in Uganda (Webster et al., 2021).

boda to make some extra money. I also own a minibus taxi on a loan. I have a driver for the taxi, a fellow colleague that I am employing (ATGWU member, interview, 2019).

The unionisation of the boda boda riders had a dramatic impact: a reduction in police harassment, substantial gains through collective bargaining, reduced internal conflict within the associations, and improvement of visibility and status of informal transport workers (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018). The rapid growth of the ATGWU – from 5 000 members to over 100 000 members in just over five years – raised new challenges for the union. These included fully integrating into a large formal–informal organisation, the need for reform of democratic processes and accountability, and the maintenance of informal–formal workers’ solidarity (Webster et al., 2021).

A significant challenge was the entrance of multinational platform companies such as Uber, Taxify and the Dutch-based company SafeBoda in Kampala, threatening the livelihoods of informal public transport operators. In order to use these apps, riders had to get into significant debt to afford acquiring a rider’s permit, phones or a bike through a loan by the companies.

It created a vicious circle of deteriorating working conditions and increased the poverty level of these workers. During the lockdown one or two riders even set themselves ablaze because things were so bad. Once you are captured in the vicious circle you cannot pull yourself out. The pressure, mental problems, accidents are increasing, and most have families (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021).

The innovative response of ATGWU to this challenge was the adoption of digital applications as tools to provide services to informal workers, which is an example of unions appropriating digital technology to empower their members (Barrett, 2018). Although the initiative to start organising informal workers and to create their own applications came from ATGWU itself (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018), the union received significant support from its global union federation, the ITF. This encouraged experimentation with new ways of building organisation and with digital organising. The support by ITF primarily aimed at strengthening the *associational power* not only of its affiliate but within the transport sector as a whole.

Rising to the challenge of digitalisation: developing a union app

It was the boda boda riders that initially pushed the union towards using digital tools in order to solve the issue of collecting union dues and to build a membership database through mobile phone applications. In the process, members also raised the issue that a digital tool was needed to connect riders with passengers as an alternative to exploitation through the multinational platform companies (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021). The representative of ATGWU explains their main motivation:

If you work in the informal sector, you need to be very flexible and you need to be responsive to workers’ demands. If you are not moving with them, they will abandon you (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021).

After a few set-backs and delays, among others because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ATGWU was successful in setting up two applications, which are both in operation.⁹

⁹ There is a third application for taxi drivers at the Entebbe Airport, which received approval from the management of the Civil Aviation Authority in January 2020. The app is a response by the Entebbe’s Airport Taxi Services Cooperative Society, an association affiliated to ATGWU, to the increasing competition from

The first is the KAMBE app, which aims at serving members; it facilitates the collection of union dues, the management of the member database and exchanges among members. Only members of the association and ATGWU have access to the app and to other benefits such as loan facilities and insurance schemes. The app was developed together with KAMBE, the Kampala Metropolitan Boda Boda Entrepreneurs, which is one of the associations that had joined ATGWU, with a membership of 64 000 (Manga, Hamilton and Kisingu, 2020: 4).

The second is the SOT Boda App, which is purely a ride-hailing app. It was developed together with another association in the union, called the SAGULA Online Transporters Association. It can be used by all riders¹⁰ independent of membership in the union. The developers are currently in the process of customising the app for a range of prices depending on distance, so that passengers pay a competitive fare compared to the other providers. In contrast to the other providers, riders only pay a small, fixed amount per day to use the SOT Boda App. That way, the main income remains with the riders.

The app was launched in September 2020 and first experiences in its pilot phase are encouraging as the numbers of riders and passengers using the app are rising. This reflects the initial positive response by riders in a survey conducted in 2019 in Uganda, which showed that respondents overwhelmingly concurred that an own riders' app would be a better option for them than the other platforms. The survey also revealed the reasons why the majority favoured a union app: improved passenger services and safety for riders and passengers (Manga et al., 2020: 4–5).

ATGWU relies on its members to spread the word about the SOT Boda app because of a lack of money for advertising.

Riders are using the current marketing and advertising strategy of the companies Uber and SafeBoda to promote their own app. As the rider is carrying this passenger, which he got through Uber or SafeBoda, he tells the passenger: 'Next time you want me, please use this application because this is ours.' And the riders wear branded reflector jackets and helmets of SOT Boda. That way they are entering and chipping slowly the market share of these established companies without it being overly known (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021).

The challenge remains that not all riders have the technical requirements to use the app. It was discovered during the pilot process that the app cannot operate on the widespread cheaper smartphone imports from China. The rider survey also demonstrated that only 40 per cent of respondents own a smartphone. Other obstacles, according to survey respondents, included not knowing how to use the platform applications, poor Wi-Fi connectivity, and lack of equipment such as high-visibility vests and passenger helmets (Manga et al., 2020: 6).

We have linked up with another local bank to do an affirmative action for workers to access loans to procure helmet, reflector jacket and a smartphone that can handle the app. We have also employed an IT person who is working with the developer to train the ten ambassadors on the functionality of the app (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021).

ATGWU believes that both digital tools are an integral part of their organising strategy. Organisers,

Uber at the airport (Manga et al., 2020: 6). Due to the shutdown of the airport during the COVID-19 pandemic, the app's operationalisation at the time of writing had been delayed.

¹⁰ Those who operate boda boda motorcycles are called riders, while operators of motorcar taxis are called drivers.

called “ambassadors”, are trained to inform boda boda riders about the advantages and the functions of the SOT Boda App.

The idea is that the SOT Boda team is for recruiting riders. Once they get in there, we have organisers to talk to them about the need to be in a collective unit. Those that are willing to join become KAMBE members, where they directly benefit from more services than the ones that are only on SOT Boda (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021).

The two functions – the hailing app which aims to generate business for riders on fair conditions, and the not-for-profit function of the KAMBE app for union members – are separated to ensure the data protection of members but also to reflect the different roles of the associations and the union. It therefore mirrors the “hybrid” nature of the union (Webster et al., 2021), with a large membership of informal workers.

As associations they have to deal with rider aims and objectives that go beyond the remit of a union. ... The associations are independent entities, registered and having their own constitutions with aims and objectives and they are not restricted from doing business. One of the key issues that brings them together is the socioeconomic empowerment of members. If that means undertaking such a business, they can. But as a union we are non-profit, we cannot. This is why we have two different apps (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021).

The ITF response: Building union power

The support by ITF primarily aimed at strengthening the *associational power* in the transport sector, including the informal economy.¹¹ Associational power, the collective strength of workers grounded in organisation, refers to unions’ membership and participation, their infrastructural resources, conceptual tools and knowledge, and the capacity to “optimise their structures so that associational action can be reconciled with the underlying structural conditions and the interests of the members” (Schmalz et al., 2018: 120).

ITF supported its affiliate in Uganda with research, capacity-building workshops and resources at a time when ATGWU was facing decline (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018: 6). The idea of building alliances and working with informal economy associations in the transport sector dates back to the ITF Congress in 2010 (Spooner and Mwanika, 2018: 13). It was the ITF’s Education Department that initiated the Informal Workers Project but, as Spooner and Mwanika (2018: 13) argue, it was to some extent “under the radar” and “not in the mainstream of priority strategic campaigns” until ATGWU presented their successful model to a 2016 global conference of the Road and Rail Sections of the ITF in Brussels. A resolution was passed at the 2018 ITF Congress that stated that the federation would make renewed efforts to bring workers who are in the informal economy into the formal economy, including activities around gig work (ITF Representative 1, focus group, 2021).

What ITF can do, given that the global situation varies, is to bring together these contexts, share information, experiences and best practice, provide a platform for affiliates to do this, provide some expert opinion around some of these issues and put all of these ingredients together in order to allow

¹¹ The ITF has 670 affiliated trade unions from 150 countries representing over 18 million workers in the transport sector (<https://www.itfglobal.org>).

affiliates to develop their own perspectives, which are locally tailored (ITF Representative 1, focus group, 2021).

On the gig economy, ITF's general approach is to develop research, policy frameworks (including first model collective agreements) and campaigns.¹² It draws on the experiences of its affiliates but also links up with other global union federations to develop demands in a cross-sectoral perspective. When ATGWU started to develop its own applications, ITF provided advice, by initiating a process of knowledge transfer and sharing in the federation. It also provided support by drawing on its networks. The challenge for ATGWU was to acquire external resources, which it received from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES). This provided ATGWU with a safe base to “venture into the unknown” (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021).

The organising app can be adapted to the needs of other unions – a process supported by the ITF (ITF Representative 3, interview, 2021):

ITF is helping in conducting research because we also discovered that building knowledge is very critical in this area. And then, of course, bringing the different affiliates together for learning and experience is important. Unions in Kenya also want to embark on the journey of developing their applications (ATGWU Representative, interview, 2021).

This encouraged experimentation with new ways of building organisation and with digital organising. At the same time, challenging the tech giants with their extensive resources through worker-driven ride-hailing apps remains a major task and entails risks.¹³ It is very difficult to achieve competitiveness, and the danger exists that unions might “spread their resources too thin” in the process (ITF Representative 3, interview, 2021). As an ITF representative explains:

We have looked at the apps in general with an open mind and a positive view, but also recognising that so much of the way that these companies work is by generating the network effect to find the efficiency and the economics of scale. That is very hard to achieve for a grassroots, alternative worker-created app that does not have billions of dollars in investment capital behind it to subsidise its operations. It is a very asymmetrical response (ITF Representative 2, focus group, 2021).

Conclusion

We have shown how Education International and the International Transport Workers' Federation were able to mobilise power resources on a supranational scale in cases where local power resources were constrained or under threat. By comparing two cases we demonstrated how the new

¹² An example of ITF's campaigns is the Rights4Riders network (<https://www.rights4riders.org>). The campaign was launched in the lead-up to Deliveroo's Initial Public Offering (IPO) in April 2021; it focused on common demands as a way to amplify organising efforts by members of the network, which includes ITF-affiliated unions and newer grassroots unions.

¹³ Experiences in Colombia demonstrate that the process of creating union apps is challenging given the start-up capital necessary to develop and maintain apps. Small and medium enterprises have struggled to compete with transnational digital platforms (Velez, 2020). Rappi Inc. workers – who work for one of the most valuable digital platform companies in Latin America – joined the National Movement of Digital Platform Workers. As part of the movement, they founded the trade union UNIDAPP to coordinate strike actions with other food delivery organisations across Latin America. It appears that UNIDAPP could not compete and the workers' app has been abandoned.

technology is not neutral but socially embedded in different power relations. Workers are not passive victims of global capital; they contest the new technology. Although the power of global capital makes it a deeply unequal contest, the involvement of the global unions facilitated the development of unions' counter power. By mobilising resources through the global campaign against privatisation of schools in Kenya and in Uganda, EI was able to draw on a global network of public support – what we have called *societal power*. By assisting in the development of an app in the national transport union in Uganda, the ITF was deepening their *associational power*.

The two cases differ in three significant ways. First, the support provided by EI was important in resisting the privatisation of education, whereas the support of the ITF strengthened the capacity of the union to revitalise. Although these are both key labour issues, they involve quite different strategies and resources. The teachers, as highly qualified professionals, built their strategy around their skills and profession and the support of civil society (*societal power*), whereas the informal riders focused on building their collective strength (*associational power*). The use of associational power by the informal riders is a reflection of their need for recognition as workers and the importance of building their organisation. In contrast, teachers' unions are already better organised, and for public sector unions influencing public opinion through the use of social power is an important common resource.

A second difference lies in the ways in which these cases demonstrate the contradictory nature of the new technology. In the case of the education unions, they were resisting the abuse of the tablet by BIA and its use to undermine the union as part of its broader and ongoing struggle against the privatisation of education. The Uganda case, on the other hand, demonstrates how the new digital technology is contested but also used in the attempt to strengthen union organisation.

A third difference lies in the relationship between the global and the local. In the case of BIA, the initiative came from the EI as a global campaign against the privatisation of education. In the case of the transport sector in Uganda, the initiative to revitalise the union came from the local, from the national union, as an innovative response to its decline in the context of privatisation. They therefore represent two different relationships between the global and the local.

The specific responses by global union federations towards the challenge of new technology, therefore, depend on the context and sector, but were also shaped by the local unions' priorities. We suggest that global unions can reinforce, but not replace, activities of the local unions on the ground.

In both cases, the GUFs initiated a process of generating and sharing knowledge among affiliates, which has been highlighted as particularly relevant in the view of local unions. Lévesque and Murray (2010) argue that the ability to learn and to diffuse learning throughout the organisation is crucial for union revitalisation and the mobilisation of power resources. In both cases, the involvement of global unions has added another layer to this capacity – that of transnational learning.

Above all, these two cases suggest that the GUFs are playing a crucial role in the new forms of transnational activism emerging in the digital age in Africa. This does not involve a choice between going global or remaining local; it requires that unions navigate between the local and the global. It also holds the potential for a new type of activist, an activist who thinks globally, but is linked to very real places (McGregor and Webster, 2021).

The GUFs' ability to co-ordinate campaigns across borders and to provide vital financial, organisational and strategic resources is opening up opportunities for union revitalisation. Through

their intermediary coordinating role at the supranational level, they deepen unions' ability to contest the abuse of digital technology.

References

- Adick, C. (2020) Globale Bildungsallianzen in der internationalen Bildungspolitik. In *Das Ende der politischen Ordnungsvorstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, edited by U. Binder and J. Oelkers. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Bakan, J. (2020) *The New Corporation. How "Good" Corporations are Bad for Democracy*. New York: Vintage.
- Barrett, J. (2018) *Mobile Money for Member Dues: Can Technology Transform Worker Organization?* Berlin: FES and WIEGO. <https://www.wiego.org/blog/mobile-money-member-dues-can-technology-transform-worker-organizations> (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Birelma, A. (2018) When Local Class Unionism Meets International Solidarity: A Case of Union Revitalisation in Turkey. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 215–230.
- Brookes, M. (2013) Varieties of Power in Transnational Labor Alliances: An Analysis of Workers' Structural, Institutional, and Coalitional Power in the Global Economy. *Labor Studies Journal*, 38(3): 181–200.
- Brookes, M. (2018) Power Resources in Theory and Practice: Where to Go from Here. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 254–257.
- Brookes, M. (2019) *The New Politics of Transnational Labor: Why Some Alliances Succeed*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Chun, J.J. (2009) *Organizing at the Margins. The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States*. Ithaca, NY and London: ILR Press.
- Civil Society Organisations (2019) *An Open Letter to the World Bank and its Donors*. https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/letter_world_bank_october_2019.pdf (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Croucher, R. and E. Cotton (2009) *Global Unions, Global Business: Global Union Federations and International Business*. London: Middlesex University Press.
- Dörre, K., H. Holst and O. Nachtwey (2009) Organising – A Strategic Option for Trade Union Renewal? *International Journal of Action Research*, 5(1): 33–67.
- Education International (EI) (2022) *World Bank to Exit Investment in For-profit School Chain Bridge International Academies*. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/26362:world-bank-to-exit-investment-in-for-profit-school-chain-bridge-international-academies> (accessed 28 December 2022).
- Education International (EI) (2015) Privatisation and Commercialisation in and of Education, Resolution, 7th World Congress. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/21616:resolution-on-privatisation-and-commercialisation-in-and-of-education> (accessed 7 April 2021)
- Education International (EI) and Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) (2016) *Bridge vs Reality: A Study of Bridge International Academies' For-profit Schooling in Kenya*. Research Report. https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/Bridge%20vs%20Reality_GR%20Report.pdf (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Fichter, M., C. Ludwig, S. Schmalz, B. Schulz and H. Steinfeldt (2018) *The Transformation of Organised Labour: Mobilising Power Resources to Confront 21st Century Capitalism*. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/14589.pdf> (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Fischer K. (2021) Global Labour and Labour Studies. In *Global Commodity Chains and Labour Relations*, edited by A. Komlosy and G. Musić. Leiden: Brill.
- Ford, M. and M. Gillan (2021) Power Resources and Supranational Mechanisms: The Global Unions and the OECD Guidelines. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 27(3): 307–325. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0959680120988238>
- Gallas, A. (2018) Class Power and Union Capacities: A Research Note on the Power Resources Approach. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(3): 348–352.

- Henderson, R. (2020) *Reimagining Capitalism: How Business Can Save the World*. London: Penguin Business.
- International Financial Corporation (IFC) (2022) *Bridge International Academies*. <https://disclosures.ifc.org/project-detail/SII/32171/bridge-international-academies> (accessed 28 December 2022).
- Kenny, B. (2021) The New “Arcadia”? Racial Capitalism, Technological Histories and the “Utopian” Future of Labour. In *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: A Sociological Critique*, edited by T. Ngwane and M. Tshoaedi. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Kumar, S. and A. Singh (2018) Securing, Leveraging and Sustaining Power for Street Vendors in India. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 135–149.
- Lévesque, C. and G. Murray (2010) Understanding Union Power: Resources and Capabilities for Renewing Union Capacity. *Transfèr: European Review of Labour and Research*, 16(3): 333–50.
- Manga, E., P. Hamilton and S. Kisingu (2020) *Riding on a Union App: Uganda’s Public transport Workers’ Digital Response to Platforms*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Marachi, R. and R. Carpenter (2020) Silicon Valley, Philanthrocapitalism, and Policy Shifts from Teachers to Tech. In *Strike for the Common Good. Fighting for the Future of Public Education*, edited by R.K. Givan and A. Schragger Lang. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- McCallum, J.K. (2013) *Global Unions, Local Power. The New Spirit of Transnational Labor Organizing*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- McGregor, W. and E. Webster (2021) Building a Regional Solidarity Network of Transnational Activists: An African Case Study. *Tempo Social*, 33(2): 15–36.
- Munck, R. (2002) *Globalization and Labour: The New “Great Transformation”*. London: Zed Books.
- Nowak, J. (2021) Transnational Solidarity Networks between Workers and Global Production Networks. In *Global Commodity Chains and Labour Relations*, edited by A. Komlosy and G. Musić. Leiden: Brill.
- RESULTS Educational Fund (2017) *From Free to Fee. Are For-profit, Fee-charging Private Schools the Solution for the World’s Poor?* <https://www.results.org/wp-content/uploads/From Free to Fee.pdf> (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Riep, C. (2019) *What Do We Really Know about Bridge International Academies? A Summary of Research Findings*. Brussels: EI
- Riep, C. and M. Machacek (2016) *Schooling the Poor Profitably. The Innovations and Deprivations of Bridge International Academies in Uganda*. Research Report, September. https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC_Final_28sept.pdf (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Runciman, C. (2019) The “Double-edged Sword” of Institutional Power: COSATU, Neo-liberalisation and the Right to Strike. *Global Labour Journal*, 10(2): 142–158.
- Schmalz, S., T. Conrow, D. Feller and M. Rombaldi (2021) Two Forms of Transnational Organizing: Mapping the Strategies of Global Union Federations. *Tempo Social*, 33(2): 163–182.
- Schmalz, S., C. Ludwig and E. Webster (2018) The Power Resources Approach: Developments and Challenges. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 113–134.
- Schmalz, S., C. Ludwig and E. Webster (2019) Power Resources and Global Capitalism. *Global Labour Journal*, 10(1): 84–90.
- Silver, B.J. (2003) *Forces of Labor. Workers’ Movements and Globalization since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schminke, T.G. and G. Fridell (2021) Trade Union Transformation and Informal Sector Organising in Uganda: The Prospects and Challenges for Promoting Labour-led Development. *Global Labour Journal*, 12(2): 95–112.
- Spooner, D. and J.M. Mwanika (2018) Transforming Transport Unions through Mass Organisation of Informal Workers: A Case Study of the ATGWU in Uganda. *Global Labour Journal*, 9(2): 150–166.

- Tassinari, A. and V. Maccarrone (2020) Riders on the Storm: Workplace Solidarity among Gig Economy Couriers in Italy and the UK. *Work, Employment and Society*, 34(1): 35–54.
- Unterhalter, E, L. Robinson and J. Ibrahim (2018) *Quality and Equalities: A Comparative Study of Public and Low-cost Private Schools in Lagos*. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/25695:quality-and-e> (accessed 29 July 2022).
- Velez, V.O. (2020) *Not a Fairy Tale: Unicorns and Social Protection of Gig Workers in Colombia*. Southern Centre for Inequality Studies Working Paper 7. Johannesburg: SCIS, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Webster, E., C. Ludwig, D. Spooner and F. Masikane (2021) Beyond Traditional Trade Unionism: Innovative Worker Responses in Three African Cities. *Globalizations*, February 2021. DOI: [10.1080/14747731.2021.1874253](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1874253)
- Williamson, B. and A. Hogan (2020) *Commercialisation and Privatisation in/of Education in the Context of Covid-19*. Brussels: EI.
- Wright, E.O. (2000) Working-class Power, Capitalist-class Interests, and Class Compromise. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(4): 957–1002.
- Zuilkowski, S., B. Piper, S. Ong’ele and O. Kiminza (2018) Parents, Quality, and School Choice: Why Parents in Nairobi Choose Low-cost Private Schools over Public Schools in Kenya’s Free Primary Education Era. *Oxford Review of Education*, 44(2): 258–274.

Interviews

ATGWU Member, Johannesburg, 24 March 2019

ATGWU Representative, online, 3 May 2021

EI Representative Africa Region, online, 16 March 2021

ITF Representative 1 and 2, Headquarters, focus group, online, 21 June 2021

ITF Representative 3, Africa Region, online, 1 July 2021

KNUT Representative, online, 20 April 2021

UNATU Representative, online, 27 April 2021

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

EDWARD WEBSTER is Distinguished Research Professor at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS) and founder and past director of the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP), both at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. [Email: edward.webster@wits.ac.za]

CARMEN LUDWIG is an international research associate at SWOP, University of the Witwatersrand. She works as the international secretary of the German Education Union (GEW) and writes in her personal capacity. [Email: carmen-ludwig@gmx.de]