

# STRATEGIES TO ORGANISE PLATFORM WORKERS

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*Reflections from the ground*

Event Report

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A PANEL HOSTED BY  
THE CENTRE FOR INTERNET AND SOCIETY

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# STRATEGIES TO ORGANISE PLATFORM WORKERS

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## PANELLISTS

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## WORKER ORGANISATIONS

Tamsang-Tamsong



National Union of Professional App-based Transport Workers



International Alliance of App-based Transport Workers



All India Gig Workers' Union



Federación Argentina de Empleados de Comercio y Servicios



Asociación de Personal de Plataformas



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In 2022, the Centre for Internet and Society hosted a panel with Akkanut Wantanasombut, Ayoade Ibrahim, Rikta Krishnaswamy, and Sofía Scasserra at RightsCon, an annual summit on technology and human rights.<sup>1</sup>

The panel brought these seasoned labour organisers, activists, and researchers working across Thailand, Nigeria, India, and Argentina in the flourishing platform labour movement. Their diverse experiences of organising in research and practice infused our discussion with insight into collective action struggles across varied sectors and regional contexts.

Our conversation with Akkanut, Ayoade, Rikta, and Sofía took place against the backdrop of the rise in collective resistance among workers globally over the past three years.<sup>2</sup>

Workers' struggles have brought to light demands for transparency and accountability from platforms, and rights and protections from governments.

What has been remarkable has been the rise of these struggles in the face of barriers excluding platform workers and their freedom to collectivise. The misclassification of platform workers as independent contractors,

needless to say, infringes on their collective bargaining rights. As a result, workers' struggles are often not recognised by the law, governments, and platforms alike. Workers' geographic isolation and platform tactics to deter collectivisation also act as barriers.

Despite these hurdles, organising and collective action in the platform economy has been overwhelmingly driven by workers at the grassroots. This panel also highlights the diversity of collectivisation structures that platform workers and organisers have adopted across regional contexts and sectors. Organisational structures in organising are vital in the context of platform work, where institutional barriers hinder workers' freedom of association under traditional union structures.

Through this panel, we arrived at strategies for emerging workers' groups to sustain and strengthen organising struggles. We sought to answer—How have workers' organisations overcome challenges in sustained collective action? What have been unique aspects of organising in the global south? Which strategies have been gaining traction for organising workers and mobilising other stakeholders?

# Panellists

## Akkanut Wantanasombut

<https://twitter.com/AkkanutW>

Akkanut is a labour activist and researcher organising delivery workers in Thailand. Along with his research team at Chulalongkorn University, he co-founded a delivery platform called Tamsang-Tamsong and has been organising workers to participate in the multi-stakeholder cooperative modelled on principles of solidarity and collective decision-making.

## Ayoade Ibrahim

<https://twitter.com/maiwega>

Ayoade is a platform union leader serving as President of the National Union of Professional App-based Transport Workers (NUPABTW) in Nigeria since 2016. He also heads the organising strategy and campaigns vertical of the International Alliance of App-based Transport Workers (IAATW)—an international federation of over twenty drivers' organisations. He has been involved in grassroots local and digital organising of app-based drivers through the two organisations.

## Rikta Krishnaswamy

<https://twitter.com/rikta>

Rikta is a labour activist and organiser, and has been mobilising platform workers in her role as the Delhi-NCR coordinator of the All India Gig Workers' Union (AIGWU) since late 2020. AIGWU was established as a way to support worker-led struggles. Rikta has helped formalise and sustain numerous struggles in sectors like delivery and beauty work.

## Sofía Scasserra

<https://twitter.com/SofiaScasserra>

Sofía is a researcher on the digital economy, labour, and development at the Transnational Institute. She has been working closely with several organisations proposing legislation for platform workers in Argentina. She is an advisor to the international trade union movement across Latin America, and has advised the commerce and service employees union on organising platform workers in Argentina.

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# Key strategies

- 1 Building trust and solidarity**
- 2 Supporting worker-led struggles**
- 3 Overcoming platform rhetorics**
- 4 Organising workers digitally**
- 5 Mainstreaming awareness around platform work**
- 6 Bargaining with legislative, policy, and judicial actors**

# Building trust and solidarity

*“I have spent years trying to build trust with workers. It has been hard and taken a long time to bring them together. I think there can be mechanisms which create a space for all sides to work together like a community-based platform. We will have to continue to show our sincerity and once the trust has been built, then that’s all you need.” —Akkanut*

Akkanut emphasised that trust was central to his efforts in organising delivery workers in Thailand. His affiliation with Chulalongkorn University as a trusted institution proved helpful in convincing workers.

It is remarkable that this trust evolved within a labour movement in Thailand that has largely left platform workers behind, as platform work has been considered part of non-standard employment. High friction between traditional motorcycle taxi drivers and platform workers had also cemented this exclusion.

Akkanut recounted how he incrementally built trust and confidence with delivery workers. He started by reaching out to workers who had been self-organising and invited them for private research group meetings to share workers’ struggles in Thailand and other

countries. These meetings became an avenue for shared knowledge- and evidence-building for organising. They helped bolster the visibility of workers, sparking the involvement of non-profit organisations and interest towards building a union.

Akkanut’s experiences of organising workers showed the important role that alternative institutions can play in an environment of disinterest from traditional labour institutions.

Akkanut narrated how success in alternative strategies of trust-building helped him with ways to build alternative structures of resistance through the platform cooperative—Tamsang-Tamsong. This community-based initiative emerged during the pandemic as a viable alternative to capitalist platforms.<sup>3</sup>

Akkanut highlighted the mutual trust and collective benefit that Tamsang-Tamsong enables as a “multi-stakeholder platform cooperative”. Workers, local businesses, and customers negotiate and mutually decide prices at the community level. Trust within this arrangement stemmed out of platform design that enables decentralisation and equity in negotiation power. Solidarity and coordination towards collective social value has been a central goal for all stakeholders within the platform.

Speaking about the Argentine context, Sofía described the trust-building process

with workers which hinged on workplace support by unions. Owing to challenges in collectivisation, some prominent unions built means to provide care and welfare as a way to start including platform workers within Argentina's robust labour movement.

The national commerce and service employees union (Federación Argentina de Empleados de Comercio y Servicios) had not been able to represent workers due to legal constraints, but devised these alternative strategies to support workers.<sup>4</sup> In large cities like Rosario and Mar del Plata, the union began offering workplace facilities like lunch and access to restrooms, and soon moved to providing healthcare and income support for workers.

*Sofía highlighted how these networks of care were instrumental in creating a sense of representation and belonging to the union and labour movement, building workers' confidence to participate in their own organising struggles.*

## Supporting worker-led struggles

*“With platforms increasingly extracting from distressed workers (especially since the pandemic), we've seen workers in most major platform companies take up organised struggles, possibly without the know-how of what a struggle is, and how it begins and concludes.” —Rikta*

Rikta narrated how dismal employment conditions during the pandemic in India triggered numerous spontaneous organising struggles by workers. The unemployment crisis and distressing economic environment during

this time, she explained, were leveraged by platforms to exploit workers all the more.

In late 2020, delivery workers in Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, and Kolkata organised against Swiggy (a major delivery platform in India).<sup>5</sup> In Delhi, this took the form of a spontaneous logout strike and demonstration at one of the platform's area offices. A logout strike is a widely used organising tactic among platform workers, which acts as the platform-equivalent of a work stoppage when workers coordinate time periods to log out of the platform.

Rikta pointed out how these spontaneous struggles were a culmination of larger

systemic problems in platform work, instead of one-off immediate demands.

The pandemic crisis, exacerbated by poor government policies and increasing exploitation by platforms, created conditions for workers to collectivise beyond immediate demands. Despite being hailed as “heroes” and “essential workers”, workers soon found that they weren’t afforded even basic support by platforms to navigate treacherous times. Decreased earnings, slashed incentives, rigged ratings systems, callous management—all worked jointly to exploit workers when their health and economic conditions were at their most vulnerable.<sup>6</sup> Harassed with account blocks for raising demands, workers were forced to conclude previous struggles without any resolution.

The All India Gig Workers’ Union (AIGWU) was formed amidst the August protests to

formalise these critical struggles. The union stepped in to sustain workers’ resistance and build their capacity for structured and coordinated organising and campaigning. This has included working with state-level affiliate unions, coordinating collective action efforts, formalising demands, and campaigning with the government at the policy level.<sup>7</sup>

***Rikta reiterated the importance of supporting worker-led struggles that point to a growing collective consciousness of systemic issues. Crucially, these ongoing struggles are conducive to promoting a model of rank-and-file organising that is worker-centric and worker-led.***

## Overcoming platform rhetorics

***“No matter whether platforms obtain our information, or find out about our strategies, the truth (realities of exploitation in platform work) is what propels us to move forward, and to continue mobilising and organising.” — Ayoade***

A crucial objective in the organising agenda of the National Union of Professional App-based Transport Workers (NUPABTW) led by Ayoade has been awareness-building on platforms’ tactics to deter collectivisation.<sup>8</sup>

The union began organising workers in Lagos in 2016 and now has members across Nigeria. It has adopted diverse strategies to support workers through widespread public demonstrations, litigation against platforms, and demands for labour and union rights,

social protection, and workplace safety.<sup>9</sup> NUPABTW is involved in both online and offline grassroots mobilising and campaigning. Its offline strategies have included meeting workers directly at places of congregation, and waiting at rest areas such as malls, and parks.

Ayoade explained that the union's mobilising campaigns are centred on encouraging workers to organise to hold platforms accountable, and resist unilateral platform policies and decisions. He found that education on auditing platforms is a crucial exercise given the lack of transparency on earnings calculations, and lack of access to workers' own data. The union, therefore, spends considerable time educating their members on using the platform, and manually calculating earnings and deductions. These steps support workers in navigating the platform in their everyday work, and help build an evidence base for disputes and demands.

Ayoade also revealed how platforms have continually extracted workers' data and manipulated app information as union-busting tactics. He explained how NUPABTW members receive notifications informing workers about surge pricing during times

when the union has planned strike action and organising activities. The union has intervened in these cases to raise awareness among workers on these technology-driven attempts at union-busting. Even so, Ayoade emphasised that while these union-busting tactics may hamper the logistics of organising, underlying mobilising factors have ultimately been powerful enough to maintain worker solidarity.

In addition to direct union-busting tactics, Ayoade and Rikta pointed to strategic rhetorics that platforms drive to mask the realities of platform work. They described the ways in which platforms devise narratives around autonomy and flexibility to paint workers as autonomous or independent contractors. In reality, workers are logging upwards of 10-12 work hours a day and fighting to earn a decent wage, while having little autonomy over their work.

Considering these realities, workers haven't been swayed by platforms' rhetorics and it hasn't at all been difficult to mobilise and organise workers. However, these rhetorics and the false projection of platform work do permeate within the government and other institutions, to an extent.

***Part of workers' struggles lies in fighting platform rhetorics and larger systemic issues. Workers' keen awareness about these issues, Rikta emphasised, serves as a precursor to sustaining organising and bargaining against platforms and the government. It is instrumental in helping workers to move beyond area and company affiliations and organise as a class.***

# Organising workers digitally

*“The best way for us (NUPABTW and IAATW) to mobilise, stay connected, resolve problems, and collaborate together—not only across Africa, but globally—has been through online organising.”*  
—Ayoade

NUPABTW and IAATW are among the growing number of workers’ organisations using digital tools in organising platform workers. Social media and private messaging platforms have been widely used to compensate for the barriers in mobilising and connecting with platform workers since they are often locationally dispersed.<sup>10,11</sup>

For international organisations like IAATW, digital tools have enabled them to operate and coordinate at the transnational level. Digital organising has usually taken a hybrid form where online tools are used for coordinating offline on-ground strike action, awareness-building, and workplace support.

Ayoade described the success that IAATW (International Alliance of App-based Transport Workers) has had with a digital-first strategy for the global coordination of over twenty drivers’ organisations. IAATW was formed as an alliance to honour a shared commitment towards winning labour rights for drivers by launching global campaigns, supporting grassroots movements, building capacities of

affiliate drivers’ organisations, and fostering driver-led organising.<sup>12</sup>

*Ayoade explained why the digital-first strategy has worked well for IAATW. Considering the nature of platform work—at least in the ride-hailing sector—prominent multinational platforms adopt similar business models across countries. The transnational private chat group of organisers and drivers that IAATW manages helps consolidate common grievances and demands against these business models in real time.*

Some of the common grievances include arbitrary account deactivation and blocking, high commissions and costs imposed on drivers, and fatigue and occupational health issues due to long working hours. Notably, Ayoade mentioned that online coordination between member organisations was instrumental in mobilising against the Proposition 22 ballot initiative in California,

and in advocacy relating to the employment misclassification case against Uber in the UK Supreme Court.<sup>13,14</sup>

On a similar note, Sofía highlighted the success that the Asociación de Personal de Plataformas (APP) has had in digital grassroots and transnational organising.<sup>15</sup> APP is a union for delivery workers founded in Buenos Aires. APP members use private chat platforms as decentralised groups where they share information and support, and coordinate organising activities. Through these groups, APP organised the first ‘digital strike’ in Latin America as a logout strike. In addition, the activism of APP workers and representatives on social media networks has provided social legitimacy to the organisation in exposing platforms’ exploitative practices, while also engaging an emergent pressure group for advocacy—platform customers.<sup>16</sup>

Digital organising is not without challenges, as Ayoade recounted from his experience of organising digitally for NUPABTW and IAATW. Online chat groups are often infiltrated by members of platforms’ management as part of intimidation and union-busting tactics. A large portion of the union’s time and resources are spent on filtering out platforms’ management, and mitigating risks to members’ privacy.

Moreover, digital organising alone may not be suitable for all organising activities, and digital strategies are reliant on offline kinship and solidarity networks for facilitating discussions and decision-making.

## Mainstreaming awareness around platform work

*“Sometimes the traditional trade union structure may play against platform workers because they are often viewed as autonomous (independent) workers. Also, traditional unions may think that platform workers are not a collective working class that can*

*be integrated within the union structure.” —Sofía*

Akkanut, Ayoade, Rikta, and Sofía shared their insights on diverse strategies that have succeeded in organising platform workers, often stemming from workers’ spontaneous organising struggles. Exploitation and oppression by platforms are powerful mobilising factors for

organising workers, despite many systemic and operational challenges.

Yet, awareness and action from leaders of the traditional labour organisations and governments is wanting.

Rikta and Sofía explained how rhetorics driven by platforms influence the stance of governments and traditional labour organisations on the ‘belongingness’ of platform workers to the labour movement. Platform workers are viewed as autonomous or independent workers who benefit from autonomy and flexibility in their work.

Sofía listed some additional challenges in convincing labour leaders in Argentina—poor understanding on the nature of platform work, the demographic profile of platform workers being predominantly young and migrant workers, and the high attrition rate in platform work that may foreclose sustained membership.

In the Indian context, Rikta explained how awareness of platform work is lacking since unions have largely been involved in the informal sector, organising very precarious workers. Awareness around the nature of platform work is slowly building through continued advocacy and campaigning at the local and state levels. AIGWU is affiliated to the national-level Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) which provides advisory support, and has, in the past, supported platform workers directly on a case-by-case basis.

***Rikta stressed that it is imperative to make labour organisations and governments understand that the nature and mechanism of platform work may differ from informal work, but should still be considered informalised work characterised by the absence of social and legal protection, exploitative working conditions, and immense precarity and insecurity.***

Workers’ struggles are actively making visible what platforms have been trying hard to invisibilise through disinformation. Workers’ organising struggles have acted as a catalyst in building awareness around the grievances and demands of workers in various platform work sectors. The visibility of unions and civil society organisations also support advocacy and campaigning in raising awareness, and making platform work legible to leaders in the labour movement.

# Bargaining with legislative, policy, and judicial actors

*“We see mostly that conflicts for platform workers have been within the judicial system and workers have managed to have wins in a lot of situations. We need to now explore regimes for platform workers which include them within the law and secure their labour rights.” —Sofía*

Sofía and Rikta highlighted how platform workers’ organisations are increasingly mobilising workers to direct their collective demands towards non-platform actors. This includes engaging legislative, policy, and judicial actors at all levels. This strategy holds hope for systemic changes to the platform work model.

In Argentina, Sofía has been part of a long campaign to amend the country’s labour laws so that platform workers are recognised and protected. The proposed law aims to institute a new labour law regime for platform work in which workers are guaranteed the right to have ‘sovereignty over working hours’ as a new labour right. Under this proposal, platform workers who work less than 40 hours a week are entitled to prorated social security benefits, and those working more than 40 hours have the right to be included under existing labour laws. Crucially, Sofía

emphasised that the proposal centres workers’ needs within the Argentine context, and ensures that the right to decide on a regime solely lies with the worker, and not the platforms or the government.

In India, AIGWU has been educating workers to direct specific demands to the government. These include sustained calls for formalisation, regularisation, recognition of the employee-employer relationship, and tackling the crisis of un(der)employment.

***Moreover, Rikta found that there needs to be a particular emphasis on securing rights for women workers on platforms, who are denied maternity benefits and workplace safety and sexual harassment laws because they are not protected under national labour laws.***

In Nigeria, NUPABTW has been taking the strategic litigation route by challenging platforms in courts in order to secure workers’

rights—a strategy that has seen success in jurisdictions in Europe and North America.<sup>17</sup>

As organisations fight for workers’ rights, the fight to legally recognise workers’ organisations themselves remains an ongoing struggle. As newer forms of collective worker solidarity structures like Tamsang-Tamsong emerge in platform work, workers’ organisations will also have to devise strategies around demanding recognition and support for these important collective structures.

*“Through these struggles, workers understand what the larger systemic issues are—What are the immediate demands, like the one cent fight, and what are the one dollar fights? How do they need to go about these fights in a sustained manner?” —Rikta*

Akkanut, Ayoade, Rikta, and Sofía took on a comprehensive view of worker organising as they shared their insights on strategies. The strategies they laid out help build the foundation for sustained participation of workers—in both the one cent fights, and the one dollar fights. Placing workers’ participation front and centre, they incorporated common threads around campaigning, education, and mobilisation for increasing worker participation, as well as bargaining with the state for legal and social protections.

The platform labour movement has faced its share of challenges. Yet, as our panellists reiterated, it’s the resilient workers that lead the charge and continue to pave the way for sustained organising and radical change. This panel hoped to spotlight steps taken in that direction, where organising efforts strive to form, sustain, and champion worker-led movements.

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