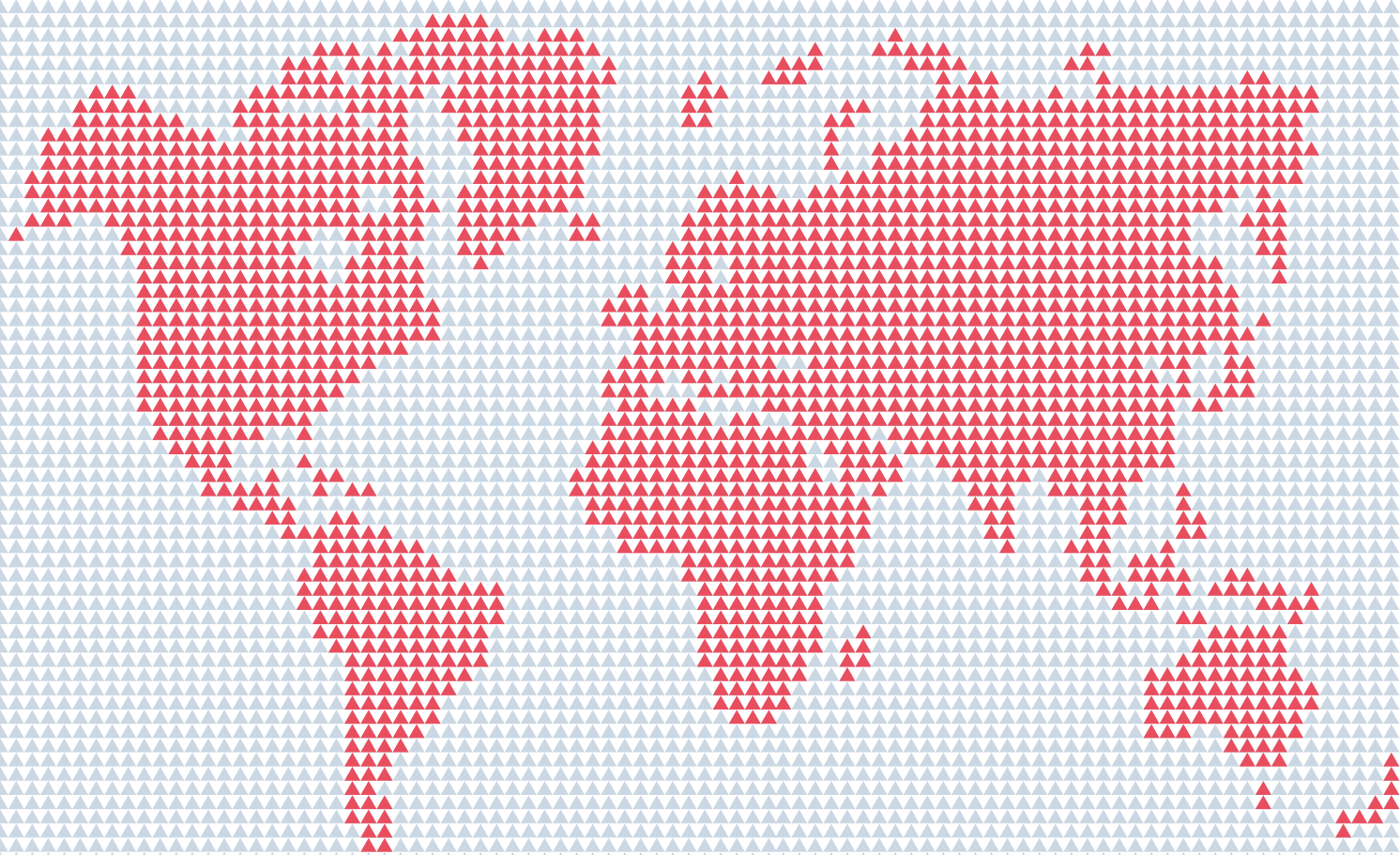




International
Labour
Organization

Trade Union Revitalization: Organizing new forms of work including platform workers



Executive summary

International Journal of Labour Research

Volume 11, Issues 1-2 (2022)

The *International Journal of Labour Research* (IJLR) is the flagship publication of the Bureau for Workers' Activities of the ILO. A multidisciplinary journal, the IJLR is a vehicle for dissemination of international research on labour, economic and sustainable development policies. Its target readership includes workers' organizations, practitioners, researchers, labour ministries and academics in all disciplines of relevance to ILO constituents in the world of work – industrial relations, sociology, law, economics and political science. The IJLR is published in English, French and Spanish, each issue focusing on a unique theme.

Director: Maria Helena André

Coordinator: Mamadou Kaba Souaré

Editorial Board: Michael Watt, Grayson Koyi, Mohammed Mwamadzingo, Ariel Castro, Amanda Villatoro, Hilma Mote

Editors: Teresa Lander (English edition), Jean-Luc Martinage (French edition), Jaime Roda and Raquel Mora Garcia de Oteya (Spanish edition)

Bureau for Workers' Activities

Trade Union Revitalization: Organizing new forms of work including platform workers

Executive summary



Introduction

Since 2019, the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) has launched an ambitious programme to support the revitalization of trade unions around the world. This issue of the *International Journal of Labour Research* aims to achieve this goal by sharing best practices for innovative strategies that trade unions can adopt to strengthen their organizations and a series of recommendations to build strong, representative and resilient workers' organizations around the world. It contains eight articles and is divided into three parts.

The first part introduces the concept of revitalization, its challenges and opportunities and the experiences of trade unions around the world in responding to the multidimensional crises that affect countries and aggravate inequalities and violations of the rights of workers and trade unions.

The second part focuses on trade union cooperation and unity as an essential precondition for strengthening trade unions. The experience of the African continent is a good example of the challenge of trade union unity and cooperation around the world.

The last part addresses the challenge of mobilizing and organizing workers in the new forms of work, in particular those on digital platforms where young people are over-represented. Thus the digital economy represents both an opportunity for trade unions to strengthen their membership and a challenge to improve their knowledge of the new technologies.

This executive summary starts with an overview of trade union revitalization (section A), followed by the challenge of unity and cooperation, with the experience from Africa (section B). The need for unions to seize the moment to increase their membership by organizing new forms of work and platform workers is stressed (section C) and there is a series of recommendations for trade unions (section D).

A. Overview of trade union revitalization

Trade union revitalization: navigating uncertainty, change and resilience in the world of work

Rafael Peels

*Senior Specialist in Workers' Activities,
ACTRAV (ILO)*

Mohammed Mwamadzingo

*Programme Manager,
International Training Center of the International Labour Organization (ITCILO), Turin*

This article assesses six innovative approaches to trade union revitalization through the lens of the unions' ability to navigate change. It introduces the "triple-A governance" framework, based on the three pillars of anticipation (the ability to understand the dynamics of change that may impact emerging futures), agility (the organization-wide ability to deal

with uncertainty and change) and adaptation (the ability to translate anticipation and organizational learning into concrete actions and strategies to create desired change). It further introduces a number of participatory, democratic and non-prescriptive tools for the graphical visualization of future outcomes that can be used by trade unions to reflect and act upon on their path towards revitalization: these include horizon scanning, the futures wheel, immunity to change and backcasting.

Key findings and implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ Trade unions have much experience in addressing uncertainty and change. They need to leverage this experience to become even more resilient in facing the increasingly uncertain future.
- ▶ However, existing trade union approaches are not always comprehensive or integrated. A possible new approach would be to experiment, for instance in the COVID-19 context, then try to understand the outcome, and then potentially scale up.
- ▶ Trade unions may choose to focus on one of the three As: anticipation, agility or adaptation. For instance, if organizational openness is a challenge, trade unions may want to focus on socialization, for instance raising awareness or reaching out to other organizations, and build broad coalitions (agility approach).
- ▶ Good practices in innovative approaches to trade union revitalization exist around the world; these can be categorized into six main thematic areas.
 - **COVID-19:** Trade union federations in Kazakhstan negotiated a special package for employees affected by COVID-19, including compensation equal to the minimum wage for workers while in quarantine, a bonus for medical personnel and in-kind benefits for large families.
 - **Attracting new members:** In Argentina, the Platform Economy Staff Association is organizing workers in the gig economy through a new union supported by the main trade union federations.
 - **Emerging jobs, sectors, and themes:** In Jordan, trade unions have worked with the Government to support Syrian refugees in transitioning from the informal to the formal economy. In Australia, trade unions have been using virtual organizing, social media, podcasts and the social media platform TikTok.
 - **Trade unions are increasingly organizing and advocating for workers' rights in emerging sectors.** In the area of sports, trade unions have been campaigning for decent working conditions at major international sporting events, for instance in respect of occupational safety and health at the Tokyo 2021 Olympics. Trade unions have also picked up the topic of non-discrimination, incorporating gender clauses in collective agreements, campaigning on equal pay and showing solidarity with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) people.
 - **Trade union internal governance:** Malawian trade unions conducted an internal evaluation to assess trade unions' sustainability, addressing key aspects of

revitalization, for example strengthening of internal democracy and rebuilding of trust among workers and society.

- **Workers' voice and social dialogue:** New topics on the agenda for social dialogue range from COVID-19 recovery to structural transformation and industrial policy, trade and labour, climate action and digital skills. Collective agreements covering platform workers have been adopted, for example bicycle couriers in Austria, UberEATS riders in Switzerland and freelance domestic workers in Denmark.
- **Coalition-building and campaigning:** In many countries around the world, the trade union landscape is characterized by proliferation of and fragmentation among unions. However, we also observe many examples of strengthened trade union cooperation: for instance, in Benin, Botswana and Mauritius, the main trade union organizations developed a joint council of trade unions or a joint declaration, charter or memorandum of understanding for working together in the national social dialogue forums.

Evidently, trade unions are undertaking many interesting and innovative strategic actions towards revitalization, but these are not always done in a formal manner; there is therefore potential for more systematic strategic thinking and foresight for trade union revitalization.

B. Trade union unity and cooperation

Unity and revitalization of trade unions in Africa

Kwasi Adu-Amankwah

General Secretary,

African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa)

Kwabena Nyarko Otoo

Director,

Labour Research and Policy Institute, Trade Union Congress (Ghana)

This paper follows the history of organized trade unionism in Africa, from popularity and power in the 1980s to disaffection and splintering into multiple unions at regional, subregional and national levels in the 1990s and beyond. It analyses the impact of the rivalry between the two main trade union organizations in terms of financial stability, membership density and representation at the African Union (AU) and international bodies.

Key findings and implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ At regional level, the African Regional Organization of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) and the Organization of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) have an overlap in terms of membership.
- ▶ At subregional level, there are autonomous trade union centres which coexists with the regional formations of the Global Union Federations to support sectoral unions in various countries.

- ▶ At national level, there are some relatively big national centres; the relatively small unions are in countries with smaller populations. Multiple national unions exist in many African countries, being most prevalent in West and Central Africa.
- ▶ The result of this dispersal of regional/continental and diaspora organizations is that the voice and representation of global African workers remains fragmented and weakened in their engagement with regional and global institutions, including the AU, the ILO, the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and international financial institutions.

One important aspect of the quest for African trade union unity is its value for strengthening African unity and African institutions in advancing the common interests of the African workers and people. The unity of the ITUC-Africa and OATUU would help greatly to encourage trade union cooperation and unity at national level, to optimizing resources and mobilizing workers to confront the challenges such as the decent work deficits and inequalities on the continent.

C. Organizing new forms of work, including platform workers

New wine in old bottles: organizing and collective bargaining in the platform economy

Agnieszka Piasna

Senior researcher,

European Trade Union Institute, Brussels, Belgium

Wouter Zwysen

Senior researcher,

European Trade Union Institute, Brussels, Belgium

Digital technologies have ushered in profound changes in the organization of work and employment. The technology-mediated matching of labour supply and demand has created online labour markets where jobs across different skill levels are divided into assignments, ranging from micro-tasks to larger gigs, and then commissioned virtually to workers who are often considered to be independent contractors. Digital labour platforms are at the forefront of these changes. This article presents a non-exhaustive review of recent forms of organizing and mobilizing platform workers across Europe, with the objective of mapping current variations in trade union strategies towards technological change and analytically distinguishing emerging patterns in representational forms among the platform workforce.

Key findings and implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ Trade unions have been changing and adapting to new labour-market players, such as online labour platforms, and to new organizational practices.

- ▶ Online platforms have demonstrated a reluctance to enter negotiations with workers where they were not formally organized or institutionally supported, yet various barriers, including employment status and the atomized character of this volatile workforce, hamper long-standing strategies for building a membership base in the digital economy.
- ▶ Traditional labour unions have been deploying existing resources and organizational capacities to form novel networks and alliances, since the core of platform workers' struggle remain focused on issues that have continually taken the centre stage of collective bargaining: fair pay, decent working time, social protection and labour rights.

Fundamentally, organizational experimentation has opened access to collective action for platform workers across a variety of sectors and jurisdictions, demonstrating that a synergy between “the organisational capacity of the ‘old’ and the imaginative spontaneity of the ‘new’” is an effective way to resist the recommodification of labour in the platform economy.

Digital activism as a pathway to trade union revitalization

Michele Ford and Aim Sinpeng

*Sydney Southeast Asia Center, University of Sydney,
Sydney, Australia*

Technological change is of critical importance for the future of unions. On the one hand, the rapid rise of the platform economy and the decentring of industrial work pose an enormous threat to their very existence. On the other hand, digital tools offer a plethora of opportunities for union engagement with existing members, but also with workers in traditional and emerging sectors with low rates of unionization. This paper examines the experiences of 11 peak union bodies across six countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Key findings and implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ Digital engagement strategies of trade unions in the Asia-Pacific region focus primarily on social networking sites (social media and messaging apps), as well as email and websites.
- ▶ Facebook is the most popular platform among the unions, with Indonesian unions being the most engaged. Unions make only limited use of Twitter, the second most popular platform.
- ▶ Unions achieve far higher levels of engagement in direct messaging, which they use intensively for internal communications, although the quality of engagement is a challenge.

- ▶ All the unions surveyed believe that the benefits of engaging with digital communication tools (raising awareness of labour issues, increased capacity to engage with members) outweigh the challenges associated with their use (lack of the necessary technical skills, low level of member engagement).
- ▶ The most sophisticated digital engagement strategies are seen in Australia and Indonesia; these are characterized by a focus both on core labour issues and on broader social issues (marriage equality, refugees, climate change, violence against women).
- ▶ A successful digital engagement strategy has significant resource implications (purchase of hardware, content creation and content management systems, staffing and skills training).
- ▶ Reaching members remains a key challenge; most digital activity involves organizations broadcasting information on various digital media platforms, with little interaction with their members or with the general public, and limited use of platform analytics, collection of contact data from individuals or online surveys.

The implication is clear. For today's unions, embracing digital technologies is no longer a choice, but a necessity. The capacity and appetite for digital engagement has never been higher, even in contexts where digital resources are least available, and this constitutes an unparalleled opportunity to drive digital engagement. The real challenge facing unions now is how best to harness digital technologies in meeting their organizational objectives. Unions that are successful in digital engagement are those that have the right staff and strategy to leverage digital tools to advance their goals.

Trade union responses to organizing workers on digital labour platforms: A six-country study

Shyamali Ranaraja

Attorney-at-law,

Katugastota, Sri Lanka

This paper examines the changing dynamics of the employment relationship in the digital economy and its implications for the continuous adaptation of freedom of association and protection of the workers' right to organize in the Asia-Pacific region. The analysis is informed by interviews with trade unions in six focus countries of the Region, selected to represent different legal jurisdictions and demographics. As all of the trade unions interviewed worked mostly with workers on digital labour platforms, and in particular delivery- and travel-related platforms, the paper focuses on the challenges of organizing and protecting these workers.

Key findings and implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ Platform-based ridehailing and delivery workers are easier to identify and approach; the unions can identify and negotiate with employers within the country's boundaries and legislative systems.

- ▶ However, no attempts to organize other types of workers, such as e-commerce workers or crowdworkers, were reported; unions stated that there was no way to identify these workers and even if there were, it was unlikely that they would be interested in joining trade unions or organizing collectively.
- ▶ There was no evidence of the trade unions making use of the technology that the workers themselves were using to obtain and perform work (the internet, digital platforms and social media).
- ▶ Recommendations coming from the interviews conducted and studies of the wider digital economy include a wider exploration by unions of working with different models of organizing, given the regulatory constraints platform workers are facing, as well as the expansion of said regulatory framework to better reflect the employment relationship of platform workers.

The conclusion of the paper reaches provides a justification for the statement that trade unions need to be more proactive in identifying and approaching all types of digital platform workers, and not only those who are easily recognizable and visible, if better rights are to be pursued collectively and protected.

Voice and representation for ridehailing drivers in sub-Saharan Africa: Pathways for trade union revitalization?

Angela D. Akorsu

*Department of Labour and Human Resource Studies,
University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana*

Jacqueline Wambui Wamai

*International Lawyers Assisting Workers Network (ILAW),
Sub-Saharan Africa*

Akua O. Britwum

*Department of Labour and Human Resource Studies,
University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana*

This paper seeks to explore the extent to which new players and non-conventional strategies shape the collective representation and voice of platform workers. Drawing on secondary sources, the paper systematically argues that traditional trade union approaches alone will not suffice in filling the representational gap. The need for a more holistic approach involving trade union responses and other players and strategies is recommended as a policy option.

Key findings and implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ Much of the organizing among ridehailers begins with drivers' self-mobilization and the deployment of different tools in pursuance of specific goals of group maintenance and cohesion – a membership logic with a cumulative political effect, leading to the deployment of distinct strategies to evoke political influence.

- ▶ Organizing among ridehailing drivers has opened up an offer of membership of trade unions – an offer driven by drivers' need for the political influence that trade unions have provided over the years.
- ▶ These grassroots organizing strategies provide pathways through which trade unions can support and formalize workers' collective action in platforms to their benefit.

Fundamentally, traditional trade union approaches alone will not suffice in filling the representational gap of e-hailing drivers. Organizing among e-hailing drivers is different from traditional forms of organizing and even reveals some nuances in the strategies and players with respect to other forms of informal economy organizing. A more holistic approach is needed, as is the flexibility of trade unions towards inclusive structures that provide a platform where concerted collective efforts for such a transformation can take place: a transformation that is necessary for trade union revitalization to take place on the continent.

Trade union revitalization in the United States of America: A call for a labour movement programme in support of self-organizing workers

Jon Hiatt

*Of Counsel and Senior Advisor,
International Lawyers Assisting Workers Network and Visiting Scholar,
Berkeley Labor Center; University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, United States*

From a peak of one third of the workforce in 1955 and still over 20 per cent in 1983, at present only 10.3 per cent of United States workers remain members of trade unions. A significant trend of worker self-organizing and formation of new independent unions has emerged, with little or no involvement of or support from existing unions. To have any significant impact, the labour movement must create a substantial, dedicated, grassroots-focused programme – a labour self-organizing workers' support (Labor SOWS) programme – that will supplement, but not supplant, the needs of these self-organizing workers. This article argues for organized labour in the United States to play a major supporting role in this unique moment and thereby promote its own revitalization.

Key findings and implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ At Amazon, Starbucks, Apple Stores, Google and many other employers, workers are embarking on major collective initiatives on their own.
- ▶ For the first time in years, the labour movement has a real chance to support the millions of self-organizing would-be union members; however, in the short term, many of these workers will establish their own independent unions.
- ▶ At national level, the Labor SOWS programme should provide support in organizing, communications, legal work and research, with a dedicated and adequate funding mechanism, and develop a model first collective bargaining agreement.

- ▶ Local labour movements should be trained and resourced to provide community partner coalition-building, employer research and grassroots organizing training.

While these examples do not provide a clear blueprint for action, they show the value to organized labour of supporting insurgencies from below. Today's labour movement has an extraordinary opportunity to put its immediate self-interest to one side and assist millions of workers seeking to organize their own unions, recognizing that in the short term the addition of these new workplace unions and the collective bargaining agreements they will negotiate can only help raise standards throughout the economy and, in the long run, may well result in many of them voluntarily joining up with stronger, longer-established unions in their areas.

Challenges of trade unionism in the face of new forms of work organization

Marilane Teixeira

Trade Union Adviser,

Centre for Trade Union Studies and Labour Economics (CESIT)

The University of Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil

This article describes the structural characteristics of work in Latin America and the Caribbean, in which a pattern of subordination to the interests of capital accumulation and large transnational companies has historically predominated. This has generated high levels of informality, self-employment, scarcity of jobs and strong social, ethnic/racial and gender inequalities marked by disparities in labour incomes and exacerbated by the new forms of international division of labour.

Key findings and implications for trade union policy and action

- ▶ The trade unions' challenge is to build an agenda to reverse work precariousness and extend representation to all forms of work organization, while ensuring universal rights and social protection.
- ▶ Traditionally, only workers in formal employment have had access to trade unions, which excludes workers in situations of greater vulnerability and sectors of low productivity.
- ▶ Workers who perform their activities at home or informally have no social coverage and find it difficult to organize themselves.

Evidently, the trade unions are trying to confront the changes and challenges brought about by the new forms of work organization through new trade union practices. Although these are necessary and should therefore be encouraged and strengthened, they are not enough in themselves and demand a broader response. The trade unions' challenge is to build an agenda that helps to reverse work precariousness and to think about the future of work, as well as deciding how to extend representation to all forms of work organization, while ensuring universal rights and social protection.

D. Overall recommendations for trade unions

- ▶ Trade union unity and cooperation are important to reinforce union membership, voice and influence at all levels. At national level, unions must focus on moving towards unity by collaborating within the labour movement to reach common positions, extending unionization to groups in vulnerable situations and extending organizing and collective action towards addressing strategic objectives, such as the creation of decent employment, decent work deficits, low wages, the impact of climate change, lack of social protection and so on.
- ▶ Establish collective and permanent mechanisms in trade union entities to achieve greater democratization of trade union spaces, involving youth, women, and vulnerable groups, including migrant workers and persons with disability.
- ▶ Trade unions must adopt innovative strategies to mobilize and organize workers in new forms of work, including those in the platform economy.
- ▶ Where national legislation does not recognize the right of digital workers to join trade unions, unions can explore other mechanisms, such as works councils, creating a collaborative platform with employers for improving occupational safety and health that will serve as a stepping stone to organizing workers formally.
- ▶ Form novel networks and alliances with emerging associations, such as self-organized workers.
- ▶ Deploy digital communication tools in reaching a dispersed, yet constantly connected, online workforce.
- ▶ Identify talent within the union that can help to generate a robust digital strategy and develop digital communication capabilities; this may include members or even staff who are not traditionally considered for such a role, but who have the necessary knowledge of and interest in digital media engagement.
- ▶ Focus on long-standing labour demands, such as decent pay, health and safety, non-discrimination and working time, thus recognizing commonalities between platform work and other forms of precarious labour.
- ▶ Trade unions can seek judicial expansion of the standard definition of the employment relationship in respect of platform work. Public interest litigation or similar initiatives may provide some advantage for workers and trade unions.
- ▶ Ensure that all those working in vulnerable conditions have access to work and social protection.

Trade Union Revitalization: Organizing new forms of work including platform workers

Volume 11, Issues 1-2 (2022)

Trade union revitalization: navigating uncertainty, change and resilience
in the world of work

Rafael Peels and Mohammed Mwamadzingo

Unity and revitalization of trade unions in Africa

Kwasi Adu-Amankwah and Kwabena Nyarko Otoo

New wine in old bottles: organizing and collective bargaining
in the platform economy

Agnieszka Piasna and Wouter Zwysen

Digital activism as a pathway to trade union revitalization

Michele Ford and Aim Sinpeng

Trade union responses to organizing workers on digital labour platforms:
A six-country study

Shyamali Ranaraja

Voice and representation for ridehailing drivers in sub-Saharan Africa:
Pathways for trade union revitalization?

Angela D. Akorsu, Jacqueline Wambui Wamai and Akua O. Britwum

Trade union revitalization in the United States of America:
A call for a labour movement programme in support of self-organizing workers

Jon Hiatt

Challenges of trade unionism in the face of new forms of work organization

Marilane Teixeira

► Contact details

International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

ILO's Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV)
www.ilo.org/actrav
Facebook and Twitter: @ILOACTRAV