

THE FUTURE OF WORK: WORKER ORGANIZING & POWER IN AFRICA'S INFORMAL ECONOMY

THE AMALGAMATED UNION OF APP-BASED TRANSPORTERS OF NIGERIA (AUTON)

The cases spotlight how new worker groups mobilize different power resources across contexts. Selected to reflect sectoral, geographic diversity and organizational maturity, the cases also illuminate effective power-building strategies and pathways, successes and enduring constraints, drawing out replicable lessons for new worker groups.

Building Blocks

AUTON was born out of crisis. In 2016, in Nigeria, drivers faced low fares, arbitrary deactivations, safety risks and lack of social protection. Ride-hailing platforms cut drivers' earnings by up to 40% and introduced exploitative commission structures. The initial response from fragmented groups was ineffective. But in 2017, Ayoade Ibrahim, currently AUTON's secretary general, began mobilizing e-hailing drivers, couriers and bikers through WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, and X (Twitter), integrating the groups into a nationwide organizing base. The result was AUTON. Formally registered and recognized by Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment in 2023, AUTON is Nigeria's first grassroots amalgamated union of non-salaried, app-based workers. It draws members from organizations such as the National Union of Professional App-Based Transport Workers (NUPA-BTW), the National Coalition of Ride-hailing Partners (NACORP), and the Professional E-Hailing Drivers and Private Owners Association (PEDPAN) of Nigeria.

AUTON's women's wing serves as the platform for enrolling and empowering the few women working as app-based transporters in Nigeria. It advocates against gender-based violence and promotes the safety of women drivers and riders by addressing harassment, passenger violence, road risks, and platform vulnerabilities. The wing carries out this work through sustained activism, campaigns, rallies, and by leveraging events like International Women's Day. It also conducts policy advocacy at both state and national levels, often aligning its activities with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) Women's Committee.

AUTON's leadership and governance model follows a traditional trade union framework but adapts it to the decentralized, app-driven nature of modern gig work, emphasizing democratic decision-making, constitutional adherence, and multi-level accountability. The union's structure includes a National Executive Council (NEC) as the primary governing body, which convenes for key



decisions such as officer removals, policy approvals, and strategic planning. The NEC comprises elected national officers (e.g., National President, General Secretary) and representatives from state branches, ensuring representation across regions. National leadership sets overarching policies while state councils delegate day-to-day execution, such as inaugurating local branches or leading protests. State-level executive councils, such as those in Lagos, Kano and Ondo, handle local issues like driver welfare, taxation protests, and company negotiations, while deferring to national oversight for broader matters. Supporting bodies include a Central Working Committee for operational coordination, Disciplinary Committees for internal accountability.

Achievements and Enabling Environment

AUTON's organizing efforts to build associational, institutional, coalitional, and discursive power have yielded significant results, notably through expanding its membership base and strengthening drivers' influence in company-level negotiations and national policymaking. Membership has grown substantially, from an initial base of 7,000 (at NUPA-BTW before the amalgamation) to approximately 12,400 members nationwide, and AUTON continues to expand its reach across Nigeria.

In 2024, AUTON's nation-wide strike helped secure a 200% increase in fares to help offset rising fuel prices, and compelled platforms to reduce their commission rates from 25–30% to

as low as 5–10%. In Rivers State, the union mobilized drivers to demand a 50% fare increase on Bolt trips. The launch of a membership-linked compressed natural gas (CNG) retrofitting scheme provided drivers with a way to save on fuel costs and enjoy stable CNG prices, making union membership directly beneficial to their everyday lives. The union has also worked with government agencies to improve driver security and physical safety, provide insurance coverage, and address rising insecurity. Beyond material outcomes, AUATON has raised gig workers' awareness of their rights, rolled out financial literacy programs, and positioned itself as a credible, evidence-driven voice for Nigeria's digital labor force.

These victories, while incremental, have been enabled by the union's organizing strategy, a global momentum in gig work organizing which created a ripple effect in Nigeria, a relatively favourable political environment, and collaborations with traditional unions and civil society organizations.

Unlike traditional unions that rely on physical meetings in offices, AUATON's digital-first-led hybrid methodology structure brings dispersed drivers, delivery riders, bike couriers, and other self-employed transport workers under one umbrella. By embracing an inclusive strategy, and engaging grassroots influencers in driver communities to serve as mobilizers and administrators of online groups, AUATON has built broad associational power, giving visibility and voice to thousands of workers long excluded from formal labor protections.

Prior organizational experience and institutional relationships acted as key enablers. The forerunners of AUATON, many of whom emerged from pre-existing worker associations, had already established relationships and experience, including engagement with the Trade Union Congress (TUC). This prior exposure accelerated organizing efforts and facilitated the timely completion of procedural and documentation requirements necessary for formal affiliation and collaboration.

By growing its institutional power through roundtables and other dialogue-based engagement with transport regulators, platform representatives, and officials from the Federal Ministry of Labour and the Nigeria National Assembly, AUATON advocates for policy reforms, push back against exploitative fare structures, and demand greater driver protections and the recognition of app-based gig workers as legitimate stakeholders in national conversation about fair work. By systematically gathering earnings data, driver testimonies, and its own commissioned research insights as well as those from collaborators, the union grounds its demands in the lived experiences of workers. This not only strengthens its bargaining credibility with regulators and platform companies but also ensures that advocacy efforts are informed by real industry standards and best practices and supported by verifiable evidence. The use of data-driven arguments has allowed AUATON to objectify workers'

grievances, move beyond anecdotal claims, and present compelling cases in negotiations, policy discussions, and public campaigns.

To humanize drivers and publicize their struggles, AUATON reframes drivers as essential service providers rather than disposable gig workers using social media campaigns, interviews, press releases, online campaigns, street protests, hashtags, viral videos, and public storytelling. The union has also invested in legal literacy, financial literacy, and driver education programs to teach members about contracts, platform policies, and labor rights, empowering them to make informed decisions and to challenge unfair treatment. Data-driven advocacy, through surveys and testimonies, further enhances its credibility in negotiations and wins public support.

The early 2020s saw landmark milestones worldwide in the legal classification and labor rights of app-based workers, such as the UK's 2021 Supreme Court ruling classifying Uber drivers as workers entitled to minimum wage and holidays, and California's Proposition 22 debates on app-based worker rights.³⁷ These events amplified calls for unionization in emerging markets, inspiring Nigerian drivers to formalize their efforts. AUATON explicitly drew from this global narrative, positioning itself as part of a broader push against platform exploitation. AUATON leaders also reported drawing on international labor discourses in their engagements with Nigerian authorities. They referenced the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 2021 *World Employment and Social Outlook* report on digital labor platforms.³⁸ The report highlighted the rapid expansion of platform work and the risks of precarious conditions. It also underscored the importance of representation and social dialogue.

As digital labor issues and heightened government focus on regulating the informal economy began to gain global attention, the Nigerian government began to take notice. This created space for recognition and reform. Nigeria's constitutional protections for freedom of association, while imperfect, provided legal recourse for AUATON's registration and advocacy. Nigeria's enabling civic space, despite occasional restrictions, including the shutdown of specific social media platforms, allowed AUATON to organize without severe repression. Drivers also used social media platforms to amplify grievances and coordinate actions.

The union has strengthened its legitimacy by formally affiliating with the Nigeria Labour Congress, signalling coalitional power and reinforcing the openness of traditional unions to work with emerging worker groups. AUATON's affiliation with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) formally provided the union with institutional backing, resources, and credibility. This support accelerated AUATON's certification as Nigeria's first app-based workers' union and amplified its voice in negotiations with key stakeholders. The NLC also mediates AUATON'S internal leadership disputes and strengthening the union's negotiation and legal capacity through targeted

trainings. AUATON's own digital-native organizing capacity and leadership agility complemented NLC's institutional weight, making this alliance effective.

AUATON's collaboration extends to external partners. It is deeply connected to the global gig worker movement through its affiliation with the International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers (IAATW). This affiliation has expanded AUATON's reach beyond Nigeria, giving it access to global expertise, solidarity networks, and best practices in advocating for app-based transport workers' rights. Through IAATW, AUATON not only draws on international legal and advocacy tools but also contributes to shaping global strategies for fair platform work.

In addition, AUATON maintains alliances with national, pan-African, and global sister worker organizations and networks, such as the National E-hailing Federation of South Africa (NEFSA) and the Digital Transport Workers Union of Ghana. These partnerships enable the co-creation and exchange of power-building strategies, the adoption of new organizing practices, and joint advocacy through joint workshops, conferences, and meetings. These partnerships develop leadership skills, enable coordinated struggles through solidarity actions, and amplify drivers' voices across borders.

The process of forming and initiating such partnerships has taken multiple routes. In many cases, personal leadership connections opened doors to regional and international collaborations. AUATON also engages in formal outreach, sending representatives to conferences and proactively seeking collaboration with like-minded unions. At other times, shared campaigns, such as coordinated action against exploitative platform policies, have provided natural entry points into cooperation. Partnerships have also been brokered by civil society organizations and academic institutions such as the Solidarity Center, University of Cambridge, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), the Oxford-based international action-research project Fairwork and ILAW. These partnerships have brought legal expertise, global visibility, and opportunities for joint advocacy. Finally, AUATON's formal membership in IAATW came through invitations from international networks that recognized its pioneering role as Nigeria's first legally registered app-based transport union.

Challenges

Certain hurdles, nevertheless, test the durability of AUATON's power. First, gig workers are still legally classified as independent contractors. This makes them easily replaceable, strips them of the right to strike or bargain collectively, and weakens their structural power. Second, platform companies like Uber and Bolt continue to resist reforms, limiting the scope of AUATON's institutional power even after official recognition. Third, the union is struggling with some internal leadership conflicts, and financial fragility because many members pay their dues

irregularly. This limits its resources to launch sustained legal battles, extensive outreach, or welfare programs, weakening its associational power in practice. Fourth, workforce fragmentation across different platforms and cities makes it difficult to maintain cohesion and unity of voice. Finally, reliance on digital tools, while innovative, carries risks such as surveillance, intermittent blockage of some social media platforms, misinformation, and uneven access, all of which undermine power building.

Replicable Lessons

AUATON's experience, which fuses digital activism and mobilization with traditional tactics such as demonstrations and lobbying, offers valuable lessons for shifting the balance of power in labor-employer dynamics throughout Africa:

- **Digital-based mobilization works.** Using WhatsApp, Telegram, X, Facebook, and other social media enables the wide-reaching organization of geographically and sectorally dispersed workers through a low-cost, decentralized, tech-savvy approach that couples rapid communication of real-time information with extensive reach.
- **Hybrid activism is effective.** Combining online campaigns with physical (street) protests maximizes visibility while reducing risks. Online campaigns through hashtags, viral videos, and digital petitions lets workers express dissent without the need to gather physically, lowering the risk of mass arrests, police harassment, or clashes during demonstrations. Online campaigns also engage workers who may be afraid to attend street protests, thus broadening participation and reducing over-reliance on risky public action. Nonetheless, the judicious use of physical protests maintains symbolic power and visibility, while online campaigns ensure that demands are amplified to regulators, media, and the public.
- **Enlisting the leadership of grassroots influencers builds trust.** Empowering online group administrators who are already trusted within the driver community builds legitimacy and accelerates recruitment.
- **Strategic alliances deepen knowledge, provide new models, and expand power.** Partnerships with traditional union, CSOs, academics, legal experts, and international labor movements provide legitimacy, build global solidarity, raise the efficacy of advocacy, and strengthen the union's bargaining power.
- **Narrative reframing matters.** Presenting gig workers as essential service providers boosts dignity, raises self-confidence, and enlists public support.
- **Evidence-based, data-driven advocacy builds credibility.** Using earnings and other data gathered through surveys and testimonies objectifies union demands, grounds them in workers' lived experiences, and results in compelling arguments during negotiations and policy discussions with regulators.