

The 8th ITF Asia/Pacific Regional Conference
Organising to Build Strong Transport Unions in the Asia/Pacific Region
14-17 May 2013, Hong Kong

Urban Transport Workers' Section Meeting
15 May 2013

Agenda item 8: URBAN TRANSPORT WORKERS IN ASIA PACIFIC – ORGANISING CHALLENGES

I. Urbanization and urban transport in Asia Pacific

1. About 44 million people are being added to Asia's urban population every year, equivalent to 120,000 people a day. Urbanization in Asia has been a much slower process than in most of the rest of the world. Asia is urbanizing rapidly but the region's population is still predominantly rural. In 2010, Asia was the second least urbanized region in the world with 42.2% of the population living in urban areas, or slightly more than Africa's 40.0%. The urbanization rates vary widely across sub regions. North and Central Asia and the Pacific stand out as the most urbanized areas. In the Pacific, this is largely due to Australia and New Zealand, where more than 85% (2010) of the population lives in urban areas. The Asian Development Bank has estimated that 80% of Asia's new economic growth will be generated in its urban economies since this is where most jobs and employment opportunities are located. These trends are placing an enormous strain on transport and mobility in urban areas.
2. In the Asia-Pacific region, natural increase, rural-to-urban migration and reclassification of areas from 'rural' to 'urban' have been the key factors behind urban growth. Seven of the 10 most populous cities of the world are in Asia, including Tokyo, Delhi, Mumbai, Shanghai, Kolkata, Dhaka and Karachi. Motor vehicle fleets are already doubling every 5 to 7 years. In some high-density cities like Tokyo, Singapore, Mumbai and Hong Kong public transport systems work well and carry millions of commuters daily. Among other Asian cities, Kuala Lumpur, New Delhi and Bangkok still depend heavily on private transport for lack of adequate public networks.
3. Urban transport in major cities of our region is characterized by large inter-modal and multi-modal sectors with several formal and informal sub-sectors involved into it. Thus different Asian cities have a variety of urban transport modes ranging from high speed metro trains to buses, taxis, trams and three wheelers (auto rickshaws, tuk-tuks and even cycle rickshaws).

II. Organising challenges

(a) Organising and networking inter-modal passenger transport

4. Intermodal passenger transport, also called mixed-mode commuting, involves using two or more modes of transportation in a journey. Mixed-mode commuting often centres on one type of rapid transit, usually rail, to which low-speed options (i.e. bus, tram, or three wheelers) are used at the beginning or end of the journey. In modern urban transport systems there is generally lot of interdependency of several modes of transport. In our region, by and large, in many cities individual sub sector modes of

urban transport are highly organized but there is a lack of inter modal and multi-modal organizing strategy, imperative coordination, organizational networking and solidarity among unions of these sub-sectors.

Mumbai city is a good example where most of the sub sectors (suburban railway, city bus service, taxis, auto-rickshaws) within urban transport have been organised by different unions and reasonably good networking and coordination exists between them. Tokyo and Singapore as modern cities also have well organised and networked urban transport unions covering most of the sub-sector modes.

Then there are examples of cities like Chennai, where organised railway workers union have extended organizational support to unionize the unorganized sector workers in the periphery of railway stations (three wheeler drivers, loaders, small transport carriers, etc). The railway Union also coordinates cooperates and actively supports the state passenger road transport unions in their disputes and struggles. This often unfolds in a display of strong and strategic strength in the context of Chennai city when the railway and road transport unions are out in their full strength during a dispute or demonstration on common labour issues.

(b) Organising privatized urban public transport systems

5. Historically, public transport was owned and operated by the public sector in most countries, which promoted and protected Union rights. In more recent times, governments and city municipal bodies have relied on global tendering systems, promoting PPP schemes and inviting multinational companies for the development (financing, construction and operation) of urban transport systems and multi modal hubs. Then there are examples where publicly owned transport sectors have set up new subsidiary companies to manage urban transport modes. All of this has had implications for employment, with massive expansion of contract and sub contract work. The situation has created new challenges for Unions to organise the unorganised workers employed on insecure work conditions and under hostile, anti-union private sector employers and contractors.

Indian Railways, a government sector undertaking through joint ventures between state governments and Ministry of Urban Development, is on course to set up subsidiary metro railway corporations in over 10 major Indian cities. While many employees are and will be on deputation from the well organised Indian Railways, employment of persons on fixed term contracts and those working in outsourced companies and under sub contractors is rampant. The established railway unions are serious in their commitment to organise the strategically important metro railway workers, but progress so far has been slow.

In Thailand and Indonesia under an organising project the ITF is assisting its railway Unions SRUT (in Thailand) and SPKA (in Indonesia) to help organise the workers in the strategically important Airport link railway company (set up as subsidiary of the state railway company) in Bangkok, MRT and Sky Train and the airport link line in Jakarta.

6. Urban transport in the neo liberal environment which promotes the contracting and sub-contracting of work is creating fragmented workplaces. Multiple small (one bus, two bus) owners provide urban bus services in many cities. This keeps the workforce divided, under fear and it is easy to circumvent legal provisions. Unions are finding it hard to arrest this rapidly increasing trend of employing “precarious workers” as companies push for the lowest common denominator and attack labour and employment standards. Sub contracting through different forms and creation of new company subsidiaries has led to less protection for workers, decrease in wage levels and social security coverage, as also deterioration in services for passengers. The ITF Charter for Public Transport includes a very prominent statement opposing privatisation and deregulation of local public transport and the unions need to highlight and use the ITF charter in their fight to oppose privatization.

A tram and bus workers' union in Hiroshima and member of ITF-affiliated Shitetsu Soren - had successfully negotiated with the management to abolish precarious work from their work place. This demand was initially rejected but however after a sustained union campaign an agreement was reached. In Bangkok, unions are lobbying the government to extend the labour laws so that drivers of motorcycle taxis and vans can be organized. Taxi industry is dominated by temporary and informal work, where workers are most exploited.

(c) Organising on the issue of public safety and workers' safety

7. With the exception of a few prominent instances, most cities in emerging Asia only offer rather low-quality, unregulated and unsafe public transport: the systems are not yet adequately developed and capital expenditure has been limited. The recent gang rape case in Delhi is a burning example of deteriorating unsafe urban transport system as the victim was forced to board an unregulated illegal private bus in the absence of dependable urban transport, where this heinous incident took place and later the victim succumbed to injuries and died. Unions in most cities of South and South East Asia have been demanding safe, secure and regulated urban transport systems. Unions organising urban transport workers could do well to strategise, include, highlight and demand the issue of passenger safety and security on public transport, and the need for specific measures to protect staff and passengers from assault. These should be an integral part of any urban transport policy.

(d) Organising around a 'Quality Public Transport' campaign

8. A joint Global Union Federations' initiative by ITF and PSI to promote quality public services (QPS) was launched in October 2010 at a conference held in Geneva. This campaign is based on the premise that Quality Public Services are not possible without having quality conditions for all workers. On 23 June 2011, ITF affiliates globally came together under the slogan "Promote Public Transport" undertaking a variety of actions demanding to defend and advance quality public transport services. This Action Day marked the launch of a joint Global Union initiative for the promotion of Quality Public Services (QPS) that will ultimately help to build strong, equitable and sustainable public transport and workers communities. This long-term campaign is currently under review and will be relaunched as the Quality Public Transport campaign, as a tool to organize and mobilize transport workers particularly the urban transport sector workers.

(e) Organising around the issue of climate change and sustainable transport

9. In the whole global debate on the issue of climate change, transport is profiled as a major aspect of climate change and various sectors of transport are seen to be contributing to this problem. In the case of urban transport, we have a strong argument for investment in public transport as a critical aspect in the fight against climate change. Asian cities do need good public transport; they fare worse than their American and European counterparts. With burgeoning urbanization it may not be possible to stop cars from taking over the bicycle lanes built in the 1960s and 1970s in China and Viet Nam or prevent the deaths of daily wage workers who cycle to work in Delhi and are often run over in road accidents in the absence of dedicated lanes for cyclists. But all these instances point to an urgent need to promote sustainable transport schemes based on affordable, safe, and environmentally-friendly, motorized and non-motorized public transport. ITF has been discussing on the issue of climate change and even has a policy document in this regard. Urban transport Unions are urged to refer this document to incorporate ideas in formulating their organizing and union strategies .

III. Prominent and developing urban corridors: emerging organising challenges for unions

10. Many urban agglomerations in Asia are evolving into mega urban regions and urban corridors, which are very large urban areas the size of fully-fledged regions and are often referred to as Extended Metropolitan Regions (EMR). Urban corridors are characterized by linear systems of urban spaces linked through transportation networks. Many such mega urban regions have emerged in Asia. For example, the Tokyo-Yokohama-Nagoya-Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto ‘bullet train’ urban corridor acts as the backbone of Japan’s economic power, while the Beijing-Tianjin-Tangshan-Qinhuangdao transportation corridor in North-East China is a huge mega urban region characterized by almost unbroken urban, built up areas. An example of industrial corridor is developing in India between Mumbai and Delhi, which will stretch more than 1,500 kilometres from Jawaharlal Nehru Port (in Navi Mumbai) to Dadri and Tughlakabad (in Delhi) and will see the creation of 7 new cities along the corridor which will have a modern dedicated railway freight corridor and multiple value added and export processing zones. Another example is the manufacturing and service industry corridor in Malaysia’s Kuala Lumpur, clustered within the Klang Valley conurbation that stretches all the way to the port city by the same name. The best illustration of a mature urban corridor is the 1,500 kilometer-long belt stretching from Beijing to Tokyo via Pyongyang and Seoul, which connects no less than 77 cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Over 97 million people live in this urban corridor, which, in fact, links four separate megalopolises in four countries, merging them into one as it were.
11. What is significant from our point of view is an analysis of which modes of transport dominate and link these corridors. And whether workers employed in the operation of these transport modes are organized or networked. If we are to build “strategic union strength and influence” in these rapidly developing urban transport sector corridors we will have to take into account these targets which may be a combination of freight and passenger modes.

Points for discussion:

12. Meeting participants are invited to comment on the background paper:

a. What are we already doing well?

Examples of successes in the region, for example: organising campaigns, networking, etc.

b. Where do we need to focus our organising efforts?

*Regional priorities for organising within urban transport
Key locations, key companies, key issues*

c. What strategies should we adopt?

*Examples that can be replicated?
New approaches?*