

**WIEGO WORKSHOP - ORGANISING INFORMAL WORKERS:
BUILDING & STRENGTHENING MEMBERSHIP-BASED
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Organizing Informal Workers: Historical Overview

by Dan Gallin

Brothers and Sisters,
Friends and Comrades,

I have been asked to give you a historical overview of the origins of organizing informal workers, but I think what we need to keep in mind, when we look at our history, is that there is nothing special in history about organizing informal workers, for the simple reason that in the beginning all workers were informal.

Informal workers are workers whose rights are not recognized and who are therefore unable to exercise those rights.

That describes the situation of all workers when workers first appear in the contemporary meaning of the term, at the dawn of the industrial capitalist age, in 18th century Europe, later elsewhere in the world. They have no rights and they are all informal.

In fact, the whole economy is informal, an economy where no social rules apply, where the strong prevail by virtue of their sole strength, because they do not meet with organized opposition. That was the economy of early capitalism and, if we look at what the Republicans are trying to do in the United States today, or the Tories in Britain, and others, it seems that is what they want late capitalism to look like as well.

To resist this, workers get organized: they get organized into unions. These are still informal workers, mind you, they still have no rights, they get organized to get rights, but they already know that their only source of strength is in themselves, through mutual aid and solidarity. Trade unions were, and still are, self-help organizations of workers who, through collective action, seek to regulate their wages and working conditions so as to eliminate the worst forms of exploitation. This in fact amounts to first steps towards formalizing an informal situation.

As unions get stronger, a "formal" economy begins to emerge, an economy in which the labour movement has negotiated regulated wages and conditions through a combination of industrial and political action (by collective agreements and by law).

Beyond wages and conditions, the labour movement, through the unions and through its political parties, influenced social and economic policy and, wherever possible, achieved a social compromise where State policies would protect, to some extent,

the general interest, the public interest, through social and economic regulation, thus further formalizing society and the economy.

But all this process I am describing here and which sounds simple in its general and sweeping outline, has in fact been uneven and complicated. We are all familiar with uneven development in different parts of the world, even within each country especially in the larger ones, and even within the working class in each country. The advance of the labour movement has also been uneven, very different according to the nature of the economy and the society, but also according to industry, according to the nature of work.

This accounts for the divisions that appear throughout labour history. There have been many, political, national, ideological, but the most important and fundamental line of cleavage that runs through the movement and through its history is the gender issue. All other issues are historically contingent, the gender issue cuts deeper, it goes back to the dawn of human society.

In any society the social organization that is dominant will prevail if it is not met with deliberate and conscious resistance. In patriarchal societies, this translates into a patriarchal organization of work relationships. It is therefore unsurprising that we find mostly women workers occupying the low-income, low-skill occupations.

Because of the gender roles in a patriarchal society, trade unions were male dominated from the outset and in many countries even opposed women entering the economy as workers, let alone as trade union members.

When they eventually accepted women into membership, they avoided tackling the causes of patriarchal exploitation of women workers, most often confining their struggles to only those shop floor issues common to male and female workers. This resulted in more male workers enjoying regulated wages and working conditions while more women workers remained in the unregulated informal economy.

This is where the division between the "formal" and "informal" economies, as we know them today, begins to appear: in industrial societies, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The male dominated mass-production industries, as well as building and construction, and transport, were the first to get organized and regulated, creating the "formal" economy, together with the women workers also employed in mass-production industries (textiles, food canning, tobacco), while at the same time the great mass of women workers, scattered in small and isolated workplaces (domestic workers, home-based workers, vendors, etc.), was left behind and almost dropped out of sight.

Very few unions in what had become the "formal" trade union movement had the insight and found the courage to include the mass of left-behind "informal" women workers in their organizing priorities. They were most often found on the radical Left and were themselves embattled minorities.

But the informal women workers organized nonetheless, because that is what workers do, and they organized sometimes with the support of the formal unions, most often without that support and sometimes even against formal unions.

When we speak today of the origins of organizing among informal workers, this is the period we mean, actually a fairly late period in the 20th century, forgetting that once all workers were informal.

I want to tell you three stories among many, because I think they are exemplary and inspiring.

The first one is about an organization most of you know very well: the Self Employed Workers' Association of India, but I don't think everyone here knows how SEWA got started.

SEWA grew out of the Women's Wing of the Textile Labour Association (TLA), India's oldest and largest union of textile workers founded by a woman, Anasuya Sarabhai, in 1920. The inspiration for the union came from Mahatma Gandhi, who had led a successful strike of textile workers in 1917.

The Women's Wing was established in 1954, initially to assist women belonging to the households of textile workers and its work was focused largely on vocational training and welfare activities.

The scope of its (womens wing) activities expanded in the early 1970s when groups of informal women workers (women tailors, cart-pullers at the cloth market, head-loaders carrying loads of clothes between the wholesale and retail markets, used garment dealers) approached the union for protection.

In December 1971, to meet the demand by these women workers for an independent structure, the TLA and its Women's Wing decided to establish the Self Employed Women's Association. The head of the Women's Wing, Ela Bhatt, a young lawyer, became its first general secretary.

The first struggle of SEWA was to gain official recognition as a trade union. The Labour Department refused to register SEWA on the grounds that since there was no recognized employer, the workers would have no one to struggle against. SEWA argued that the main function of a union was to unite the workers, regardless of their employment relationship. Finally, SEWA was registered as a union in April 1972.

SEWA grew continuously, from an initial membership of 320 in 1972 to over 6,000 in 1981. By then, however, relations between SEWA and TLA had deteriorated. The TLA (male) leadership had become increasingly uncomfortable with an assertive women's group in its midst with its own agenda and its own views on union priorities.

Tensions came to a head in 1981 over the issue of reserved seats for low-caste students in medical college. High caste students and their supporters had launched a campaign to abolish these reservations involving riots that caused over 40 deaths. The TLA had decided to remain silent on this issue, whereas Ela Bhatt took a strong public position in defence of the reservations. Ela Bhatt was accused of "extreme indiscipline" and SEWA was expelled from the organization, at a meeting where she, and her fellow delegates from SEWA, were treated with derision and contempt.

Kalima Rose, in her book about SEWA, quotes Elaben recalling the rally of solidarity which followed. Two thousand women came, the majority of them lower-caste, "and there was fire in their heart and eyes. Everyone who had been there (at the meeting where SEWA was expelled) spoke with great courage and indignation about what they had heard and seen. Both leaders and working class women took turns speaking with equal assertiveness. There was such a sense of liberation that there was no man heading the meeting and telling us what to do or think.

"There was no one we had to be careful not to hurt if we did not pay him enough respect. It was our first meeting without a *topee* (literally "hat", but meaning, male leader). We passed a resolution that day that men would not be allowed as members or as office bearers of our union. Although insulted at the way we had been thrown out, really, we felt most powerfully, an incredible sense of freedom."

An "incredible sense of freedom" – that is what organizing is all about

The second story is about the cooks in La Paz, Bolivia.

Women workers' unions in Bolivia were formed in the 1920s as part of the anarcho-syndicalist Federación Obrera Local (FOL), at that time the leading trade union organization in the country.

In 1927 a group of anarchist women workers, led by Catalina Mendoza, Rosa Rodríguez de Calderón, Susana Rada, Felipa Aquize, and others, created the General Women Workers' Union (Sindicato Feminino de Oficios Varios (SFOV)) under the auspices of the FOL.

The (male) FOL leadership considered that the basic principle of the First International, that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves", also applied to women and fully supported this initiative. Relations between male and female unions remained mutually supportive, in this case probably because of a serious commitment to a shared anarchist philosophy.

On the other hand, the anarchist trade union women soon came into conflict with the women's rights movement, dominated by women from the Creole oligarchy. In 1929, a delegation from the women's union participated in the National Women's Convention where it submitted a document entitled "Ignorance is the mother of slavery", denouncing the social situation of working class women.

They got a hostile reception and withdrew from the Convention. According to Petronila Infantes, later a leader of the Cooks' Union, "the ladies were upset because the "cholas" (working class Indian women) came to mix with them."

The General Women Workers' Union included cooks working in households, laundry workers, dairy workers, flower vendors and other street and market vendors. As membership grew, separate unions were established for the different categories of workers and the union was eventually reorganized as the Women Workers' Federation (Federación Obrera Feminina (FOF)). At its peak, the FOF had sixty

unions the most important of which were the Cooks' Union (Unión Sindical de Culinarias (USC)), founded in 1935, and the Flower Vendors' Union (Unión Feminina de Floristas (UFF)), founded in 1936.

Both these unions were the outcome of specific struggles. The USC originated in a struggle against discrimination in public transport: middle class ladies had objected that cooks, with their bags of purchases, were taking too much space in the streetcars. The municipality then prohibited the cooks from using streetcars; in response, the cooks held a mass meeting at city hall and got the prohibition rescinded. Subsequently, a raise in streetcar fares was also cancelled after another mass demonstration of the cooks at city hall.

The USC was organized shortly after these incidents and met with a mixed response from the employers (the middle class ladies): some refused to hire USC members, others on the contrary preferred to hire union cooks because "they were guaranteed by the union" and more responsible in their work.

The main demands of the USC were: recognition of cooking as a skilled trade, the eight-hour day for domestic work (later the five-hour day, from 09:00 to 14:00, with cooking only, to the exclusion of other domestic tasks), the establishment of public child care centres, freedom of expression (the right to say what they pleased, at work and off duty, without reprisals), the abolition of the "health certificate" imposed by the municipal authorities and increased wages.

The Flower Vendors' Union became organized after a flash flood at the end of 1935 wiped out the street markets in La Paz. The flower vendors and, through them, other street vendors became organized to demand the establishment of municipal markets. In 1938, several municipal markets were opened, but they turned out to be far too small, with a capacity of 600 places, although 2,000 were needed for union members alone. On the grounds that "official" markets now existed, the police started repressing vendors selling elsewhere in the city. Violent clashes took place, with police beating and arresting the vendors and destroying their property and produce.

In 1940 and 1941 the FOF lodged complaints with the authorities against police abuses and demanded that street vendors be recognized as a "social function." As they were getting no response, they threatened a general strike and obtained the resignation of the mayor. They also sued 25 policemen known for harassing vendors in different street markets and, although they did not obtain the destitution of the policemen, the abuses ceased for a time.

In 1943, the Flower Vendors Union again led a protest action of the federation against another mayor held responsible for the arbitrary conduct and the abuses of the municipal authorities. The FOF now also demanded municipal price controls of basic commodities, the punishment of abusive policemen and an end to favouritism at the markets.

The women workers' unions of the FOL not only confronted municipal authorities but, as Indian women ("cholas"), also the Creole upper class, in the households and in society, as shown in the streetcar incident, which raised basic civil rights issues.

The markets became spaces of communication where social relations were cemented, not only among vendors but also among cooks who would do their shopping there and thus break out of the isolation of their workplaces. Because of their strong roots in specific social and cultural struggles, the women's unions outlasted their male counterparts. In the 1940s the FOL went into decline because of the combined effect of repression by successive authoritarian governments and the competition from new unions led by political parties of the radical Left. By 1947 it had practically ceased to exist. The FOF however, continued, still under anarcho-syndicalist leadership, and eventually joined the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) in 1953.

The third story is about the *mondine*, the seasonal workers in the rice fields of Northern Italy.

Women workers' unions as such did not exist in Italy, but some of the most significant social struggles in the first sixty years of the 20th century were conducted by these seasonal women workers.

Rice production in Italy has a history of several centuries, but grew rapidly in the late 19th century. Today, Italy is the largest rice producer and is the only rice exporter in Europe. In the early 20th century and up to the early 1960s, some 150,000 women travelled every year to the rice fields of Piedmont (Northern Italy) to work as weeders (removing weeds from the rice fields) and replanting the rice, from May to July. They were known as *mondine* (from *monda*, weeding).

Most came from farming families in Piedmont and Lombardy, as well as from the more remote regions of Emilia and Veneto, later from Southern Italy. They would travel for days in cattle cars to be hired for the season.

The work was backbreaking: 15 to 16-hour days, bent over in the hot sun, up to the knees in water. The wages were very low (and sometimes not paid in full); part of the wage was paid in kind (rice or other grains, sometimes spoiled); housing was miserable and unhygienic, food was inadequate; the *mondine* would catch fish, frogs and snakes from the rice fields to supplement their diet. Widespread occupational diseases included rheumatism, skin diseases, digestive disorders, parasites. Sexual harassment from owners and supervisors was rife.

Local rebellions and strikes started in the 1890s and were put down by police. In 1901 the first general strike broke out, mostly for higher wages but also for better housing and for shorter hours. The *mondine* became organized in the socialist agricultural workers' union, but remained in control of their demands and of their movement. Strikes continued every season in the following years. In 1904 the 10-hour day was made official, in 1906 the 9-hour day, but the *mondine* kept fighting for the 8-hour day, which was finally won in 1909, for the first time in Italy.

Remarkably, the *mondine* maintained their militancy and cohesion throughout the fascist period, for example striking in 1934 against the attempts by the rice field owners to cut their wages and in 1941, in the middle of the war, for a wage increase.

In the post-war period, the *mondine*, now organized in the Federbraccianti, the agricultural workers' union of the General Confederation of Labour CGIL (representing the communist and most of the socialist current in the labour movement), succeeded in vastly improving their conditions including the 7-hour day. However, mechanization of rice cultivation and the use of herbicides, which began in the 1950s, gradually replaced manual labour: from 100,000 at the end of the war, the number of rice weeders went down steadily to less than 30,000 in 1963. Many also went to work as factory workers in the rapidly developing industries in Northern Italy. By the 1980s Italian rice cultivation was entirely mechanized and the *mondine* had disappeared.

They left behind a legend and a culture of independence and rebelliousness. Their work songs, many of which were songs of struggle and of derision (against owners and supervisors), have remained popular and are sung today by choirs of ex-*mondine* or their daughters. The left-wing classic *Bella ciao*, a song of the Italian partisan movement, was originally a *mondine* song, with different words of course.

The film *Riso amaro* (Bitter Rice) by Giuseppe de Santis, a classic of post-war Italian neo-realism (1949), is set in the context of the life and work of the *mondine*, although it is a rather romanticized version of their hardships and struggles.

And here is the latest twist in this tale: the *mondine* are back – but they are Chinese! Today, there are tens of thousands of Chinese migrant workers, both men and women, tending to the rice fields of Northern Italy, they are cheaper than machines and also more efficient. I do not know if they are organized, frankly, I doubt it. But I will find out, and I will tell you that story another time.

In any event, there already is a Chinese version of *Bella ciao*.

We have been to India, to Bolivia and to Italy, and these are only three instances of informal workers organizing among many. I wish we had time so I could tell you about domestic workers and about the international network they created only two years ago, and about the tremendous energy and enthusiasm this activity has released. I am sure our comrades the waste recyclers have had similar experiences, and Pat could tell us about street vendors getting organized. Some of us are involved in organizing home-based workers and this is another story to tell.

All I want to say now in conclusion is that when it comes to organizing internationally and to create international networks, the role of WIEGO and of its Organization and Representation Program has been decisive and will remain crucial as we move into other areas of the informal economy.

I had hoped that Marty would tell you about it but she is not here. In brief, and very quickly: the history of international organization of informal workers is relatively recent, WIEGO itself was only founded in 1997. HomeNet International was founded in 1994 – it collapsed six years later, but it will rise again like the phoenix from its ashes. StreetNet was formally launched in 2002, the first international conference of waste recyclers was held in 2008 and I already mentioned the domestic workers' network, a very positive product of the cooperation between WIEGO and the IUF.

It has been a short but eventful history, and as we advance there will be many more of us, the internationally organized informal working class.

I thank you for your attention.