

Solidarity among Jakarta's gig economy drivers

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"Nowadays [...] if you want to earn money, you need to work your ass off. Why? [...] (Because) there are too many drivers on the street! It is like several people fight over a peanut! There should have been quota system!" (Ride-hailing driver in Jakarta. Interview with the Author, 21 July 2018).

Ride-hailing services have flooded the urban transportation market in Indonesia, the strongest market in South East Asia today, offering a wide array of services from transportation to groceries shopping.

Go-Jek and Grab, the two biggest start-ups in the region, are estimated to each recruit around one-million drivers throughout the country. They have been joined by other players, including Blu-Jek, Lady-Jek, Bitcar and Anterin, although many have ceased to operate amid heated competition.

They are parts of the emerging 'gig economy' - new businesses that rely on a flexible workforce that deliver various services via digital platforms. Workers engage with precarious work - insecure, uncertain, and unstable employment practices, associated with the transfer of most risks from business and the government to workers. Here, the use of digital apps to connect workers and consumers and to supervise work performance makes employer-employee relationships rather ambiguous, depriving workers of fundamental rights at work.

Recent scholarship has attempted to predict the impact of rising precarious work on the future of labour politics. The most prominent is Guy Standing who views

precarious workers as a disorganised force, although he asserts that they could be the vanguard of a radical progressive transformation where they would unite around a shared identity and address the structural underpinnings of their increasing precarious working and living conditions.

The gig economy is the new frontier of precarious work, where workplace-based collective organisation is problematic. Workers in the gig economy have no or very limited access to employment rights, including those associated with collective bargaining. The absence of physical workplaces and the digitisation of work practices also allows for labour being atomised and dispersed, posing formidable challenges for workplace-based collective organisations.

Yet, in Indonesia and elsewhere, those workers have formed and engaged in collectives to improve working conditions. These collectives show that precarious workers are not entirely disorganised; and that through them workers can develop solidarity that enables them to stand up to management and the government and further their interests to some degree.

I explore forms of collectivism formed by ride-hailing drivers, as well as limits of solidarity forged under precarity. In doing so, I consider the specificity of the Indonesian case study, while giving attention to the rise of gig economy companies as a global phenomenon (started in the advanced economies of the West around the height of the 2007-2008 global economic crisis).

Workers' communities in a digitised 'workplace'

In Indonesia, communities of ride-hailing drivers have mushroomed in Jakarta and other big cities. Such communities allow the drivers to share responsibilities for their own welfare.

The communities work by operating as a form of risk-management group, which

allows drivers to pool their resources in monetary or non-monetary forms, such as information, expertise, or equipment – putting together an array of resources to benefit their members, according to a broad set of informally agreed rules. They thus play an informal social security function on which the drivers and their families can rely to supplement income or meet associated costs in the event of adversities like illness, accidents, and death.

The communities also redistribute resources put together by their members to provide support to one another to improve work security. In the absence of a physical workplace, they use social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook to fortify and maintain connections. They use WhatsApp's live location sharing menu to follow their members' driving route in real time, especially during the night and in parts of city with which they are unfamiliar. WhatsApp groups also allow drivers to send reports to others in the event of incidents such as vehicle breakdowns, illnesses, accidents, and *begal* (violent motorcycle theft). Here, communities task their member(s) to monitor WhatsApp group chats and mobilise nearby drivers to respond to an incident. They also use WhatsApp group chats to crowdsource information about locations of passenger hotspots, traffic jams, and road construction, as well as about new pricing and incentive mechanisms and emerging company or government policies.

This form of collectivism is not exclusively found in Indonesia. In the advanced economies of the West prior to the establishment of the welfare state, labourers built an independent mutual support fund to financially support each other. The collectivism lost ground in a welfare state, as the responsibility for welfare provision shifted to the employers and the government.

In Indonesia, workers' communities emerge in a context where the national social protection system has continued to be inadequate, especially to protect those in the pervasive informal sector. These workers, like others in low and middle income nations, have been pushed to rely on self-help communities in creative ways. In urban situations such workers, who include *pemulung* (scavengers) and street

vendors, often face violent threats when performing their work in the form of harassment by competitors or eviction from particular locations by officials. Forging or participating in self-help communities provides these workers with a means to come together and face common threats as a collective.

Work practices in the transportation and delivery sector also allow drivers to meet up in different parts of cities. Some have created 'shelters' and 'base camps', making use of *warung* (small kiosk) adjacent to parking spaces. These provide drivers with a place to rest between rides and enable the formation of workers' communities. Such communities are given names and logos by their founders - displayed in stickers, T-shirts, vests, and jackets produced by the communities - providing a sense of identity and belonging. The communities range in size with informal groups (of around 15-60 people) being typical. However, some small communities join larger associations which connect to hundreds of similar communities and operate on a national scale. Some of the associations are formally registered at the Indonesian Ministry of Law and Human Rights.

There are at least three types of communities and associations in Jakarta: those that are relatively independent, those that are connected to unions, and others that are affiliated with NGOs that work with urban poor communities. To date, unions' attempts to mobilise drivers in the ride-hailing industry have come mainly from the Aerospace and Transportation Workers division of the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers (SPDT-FSPMI). FSPMI is one of the largest and respected union federations in Indonesia in terms of organisational capacity. Nevertheless, SPDT-FSPMI manages to attract only a small number of ride-hailing drivers, compared to other associations.

Collective bargaining and workers' protests

Although most workers in the gig economy are not represented by unions, some associations forged by Jakarta's ride-hailing drivers have also operated in a way that

is similar to the ability of unions to collectively organise their members to fight against perceived injustice at work. They do so while continuing to support the drivers to share responsibilities among themselves, albeit to different degrees. They have attempted to harness the power of collective bargaining via collective organisations and become a way that enables drivers to stand up to their employers and the government. They have done so by organising strikes and protests – the only available means for workers to engage with the state and capital in the absence of formal union representations. By doing so, they bring the concerns of the drivers into the public sphere and put pressure on the companies and the government to meet their demands.

One of the earliest protests by ride-hailing drivers occurred in Jakarta in late 2015. Since then, various union-like organisations have continued to help drivers take to the streets and bring up an array of issues, including falling payment price per kilometre, the ban and suspension of drivers' accounts, the power imbalance between drivers and the companies, and impossible performance targets. Protests and strikes have also been organised to put pressure on the government to take action to halt the deterioration of working conditions in the digitised transportation sector. Two-wheeler ride-hailing drivers took legal action to demand the legalisation of motorcycle taxis as a form of public transport; and four-wheeler drivers have taken to the streets to express support for (and opposition to) the government's plan to regulate the service.

Mixed success

In 2019, the government enacted new regulations relating to the operation of two-wheel and four-wheel app-enabled drivers' services. The changes were initially pushed by taxi companies which were threatened by increased competition with the ride-hailing apps. While the new regulations include a rise in fares, the new rate is still below what was proposed by the drivers. The government had also planned to prohibit ride-hailing firms from giving tariff discounts to avoid 'predatory pricing',

but subsequently cancelled it.

In addition, the ride-hailing apps have continued to stand firm on the possible suspension of drivers, arguing that it is aimed at protecting the safety of the passengers. They have done nothing to revise performance targets as demanded by the drivers or amend the partnership agreement between companies and drivers, asserting that drivers who disagree with the agreement can withdraw from it at any time (the consequence of which would be they could no longer work).

However, some protests and demonstrations and have resulted in negotiations with management. For instance, an association managed to secure an agreement with Grab management to organise a meeting with community leaders every three months. The meetings have resulted in some changes, such as a change to the apps that explain the bonus system, making it easier for the drivers to understand it.

In the advanced economies of the West, gig workers' self-organising attempts have been linked to union movements, as has occurred in London and across the US. Such links have not been free of difficulties, as the incompatibility of rising precarious work with the trade union mode of organising has significantly weakened the power of unions. Nevertheless, workers have won some small, but important victories.

Union organising modes are more problematic in Indonesia where the labour movement was heavily suppressed under authoritarianism. However, since then union-like organisations forged by ride-hailing apps drivers have established connections with labour and broader independent society movements, having more space to organise more freely in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Precarious solidarity

The kind of collectivism that emerges through ride-hailing drivers' communities has the effect of conditioning workers to accept their roles as the bearer of most work-related risks, making it more difficult to engage them in action that might deliver

them better rights as workers.

These communities facilitate their members to share responsibility to improve their well-being. As such, they promote a form of collectivism that accustoms workers to conceive of their role as active participants of their own risk-reduction, inadvertently producing their consent to the restructuring of work practices that make workers (rather than employers and the state) the bearer of most work-related risks.

It could, therefore, contradict forms of solidarity that enables workers to see problems as structural and to use collective action to address them. As the gig economy model denies workers the right to form a union or bargain collectively, forms of solidarity that enable political struggle may put their employment at risk.

Ride-hailing drivers' communities also allow their members to gain immediate pay-off from the groups they enter in the form of assistance in times of need. As such, they condition the development of a kind of collectivism that reproduces workers' commitment to short-term gains. This could hinder the development of types of solidarity that allow workers to demand better working conditions from management and the government. The need to achieve short-term goals amid precarious working and living conditions discourages many workers from making long-term commitments to improve their working conditions.

This creates disagreements between workers: many prioritise short-term goals and distrust other attempts to deliver better working conditions, as illustrated in the following statements from key leaders of workers associations.

"I often say to our members [...] we do not need to join the protest, just be grateful of what we could earn. It depends on yourself, if you take a lot of break[s], you will not earn much" (interview, 26 September 2018).

(When there is a call to join a protest) we need to check, who are the organisers [...] Some groups organise protests to attract the attention of political (elites). They don't genuinely represent drivers' interests (interview October 2018).

Adding to this, union-like organisations are divided over different forms of organising workers. While some of them resort to union organising and/or establish and maintain connection with unions, there are others that resent unionisation. The latter see ride-hailing drivers as ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ and ‘partners’ instead of employees of the companies and thus unsuitable for union representation. They also question unions’ independence and effectiveness in pushing for change.

Apprehension to collective organisation and union modes of organising workers is illustrated in the following statements by key leaders of union-like organisations:

We own our own assets, while [...] working for (or being employed by) the firms. We operate our own car [...] We take care of the maintenance cost of the vehicles ourselves. We are on our own. That makes us partners (instead of employees) of the firms (interview July 2018).

“Up to this day, unions have not yet managed to solve problems with labourers, therefore, we have more confidence when we develop our own association [...] (other than that) unions have often been compromised by political interest [...]. When there are disputes they may reach a deal after a negotiation, but it is rarely implemented (interview November 2018).

Under such circumstances, ride-hailing drivers’ associations use different tactics to achieve their aims. Some prefer a collaborative relationship with the app companies, aiming to secure financial or in-kind support for their members and obtain informal/indirect access to management. But those that use non-cooperative strategies in their relationships with the companies see cooperation as undermining the political struggle to improve working conditions.

This kind of tension is expressed by key leaders of the drivers’ associations.

The management organises a fortnightly meeting (with us) [...]. (We can express) our complaints [...] they will take a note, make a report and make some improvements [...]. [The management also donated] the green umbrella for our

basecamp to decorate it [...] (We also received) a banner, a first aid box, a water dispenser and a cable roll. (Interview October 2018.)

(There are some) pro-management communities [...]. I have heard that they receive money from the firms [...]. They refuse (joining protests and strikes) [...] (they also) attempt to fail the protests and strikes [...]. They persuade the drivers not to join the protests and strikes and create conflict among us (interview, 6 August 2018).

An additional problem is that allegiances between drivers and their collective organisations can easily end. The fluidity of the digitally-mediated organisational form of workers self-organising attempts also contributes to the fragility of the solidarity. Although social media platforms enable the formation of a group, they also make it difficult to maintain a loyal membership and create a problem of divided loyalties.

Conclusion

In the advanced economies of the West, the rise of the gig economy is associated with the dismantling of the SER (Standard Employment Relationship) where workers are hired to work full-time and have an array of benefits in return.

In Indonesia, the gig economy is expanding in a context where precarious work has long been the standard because most workers remain in the informal and the agriculture sectors and unions are plagued by legacies of authoritarianism. The recent informalisation of formal sectors – such as those demonstrated by ride-hailing drivers' apps – makes unionisation more challenging. Failure to mobilise as a unified group costs unions the opportunity to form meaningful labour partisanship – where their interests are represented by a political party that seeks to be elected to government. Employers also continue to engage in practices that limit unions influence, for instance, by financing and supporting the establishment of company unions to compete with or prevent the emergence of genuine workers representation.

Under such circumstances, classification of workers as ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ and ‘partners’ in the gig economy complicates attempts at unionisation. Reluctance to join unions can also be attributed to their inadequate capacity to wield influence in workplace and on broader social-political issues.

The legacy of authoritarianism has also challenged NGOs that work with urban poor communities. The NGOs have supported some ride-hailing drivers associations in some of their activities, including strikes and protests. But because they are operating in a post-authoritarian environment, their actions tend to be pragmatic and less-ideological. Often out to achieve short-term goals rather than broad reform, their movements are marked by patterns of fragmentation.

In addition, among ride-hailing drivers, questions about the ‘genuineness’ of protests and strikes, as shown in a driver statements quoted above, stem from the fear that they are merely used by key leaders of the organisations for their own benefit. Informal workers in urban situations have often been approached by political elites to foster support and their votes. Among the informal workers are *ojek* (motorcycle taxi) drivers of whom ride-hailing drivers are often associated with. An agreement is usually made between political elites and key leaders of workers organisations. The latter will gain material goods and other benefits, in return for support, which can then be distributed to members of the organisations. Here, urban informal workers’ fragmentation as a social force hinder them from negotiating with the political elites to push for structural changes.

Such dynamics indicate that opportunities for precarious workers in the gig economy to unite under shared identity and push for structural changes are influenced by the specific context in which attempts at collective organisation emerge. Further studies are therefore required to explore the connection between the fragility of solidarity forged under precarity and the future of labour politics, considering variances in countries with different historical trajectories.

All quotes from drivers are from interviews the author completed with 48 two and

four-wheeler ride-hailing drivers in Jakarta between June and December 2019 as a part of her PhD research project.

Banner image: Two-wheeler ride-hailing drivers meeting point around some small kiosks adjacent to parking spaces', Jakarta, December 2018. Credit: Author

Listing image: A two-wheeler ride-hailing driver wearing a vest with an association logo. Jakarta 2019. Credit: Author

Feature image: Two-wheeler ride-hailing drivers meeting point around some small kiosks adjacent to parking spaces', Jakarta, December 2018. Source: Author

Listing image: A two-wheeler ride-hailing driver wearing a vest with an association logo. Jakarta 2019. Source: Author