

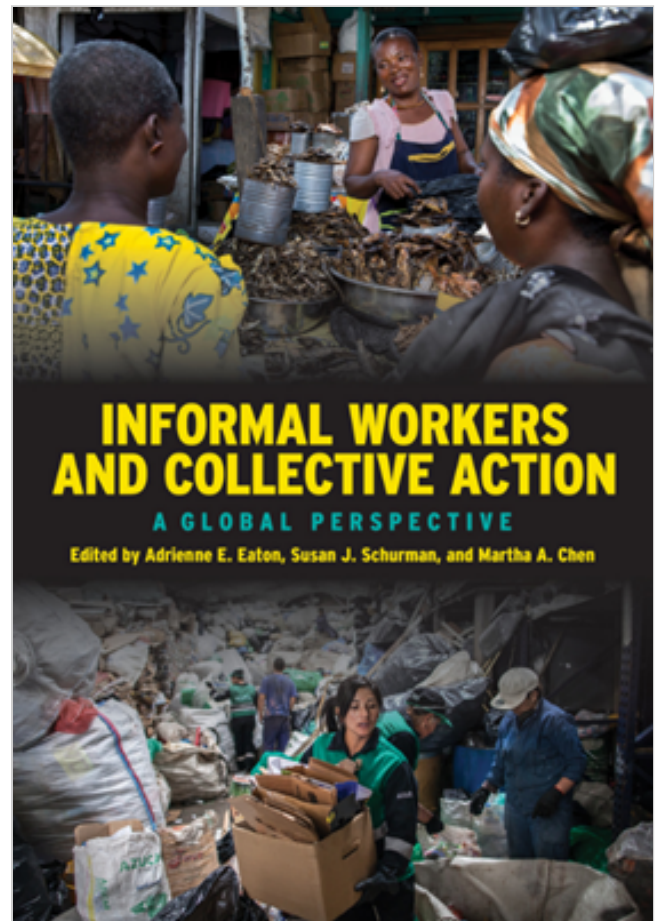
Labor's new challenge—securing the rights of informal workers

Informal Workers and Collective Action: A Global Perspective. Edited by Adrienne E. Eaton, Susan J. Schurman, and Martha A. Chen. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017, 296 pp., \$29.95 paperback.

No employment contracts. No employer-sponsored health or retirement benefits. Wage instability. Dangerous working conditions. No paid leave. Little to no protection under national employment laws. These are the conditions that many informal workers face around the globe.

The population of informal workers is significant—estimates suggest that over 50 percent of the developing world's nonagricultural employment is informal. This is a huge portion of global labor activity, and it deserves the attention of both academics and labor organizers. In *Informal Workers and Collective Action: A Global Perspective*, editors Adrienne Eaton, Susan Schurman, and Martha Chen present nine case studies. Each case study details the efforts of workers' organizations or unions to enroll and educate members and to negotiate for higher wages and better working conditions. The case studies were all based on extensive field research, including interviews and focus groups with workers, organizational leaders, and business and government stakeholders.

Part 1 of the book focuses on workers who have what the editors call "distanced employment relationships." Such workers are often hired through subcontractors or work on a casual or as-needed basis. The employer may use these distancing strategies to circumvent laws regarding pay and benefits, and may deny responsibility for workers' safety. Part 2 examines the plight of self-employed workers. While these workers have somewhat greater control over their working conditions and schedules, they are often still



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beholden to local government authorities. Governments create and enforce regulations that may be costly for self-employed workers to comply with or that may restrict workers' practices or areas of operation.

One of the major themes that quickly emerges in the book is the need to rethink the role of unions and how they engage with workers. Collective bargaining is customarily thought of as a process that occurs between employers and formal employees. However, when labor organizations welcome and advise informal workers, progress can be made in securing the rights of a much larger chunk of the labor force. In South Africa, the South African Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) was able to unify formal and informal workers, despite formal workers' fear that such a partnership might degrade their own pay and benefits. SACCAWU organized strikes and later successfully negotiated with both retail and hotel chains. These negotiations led to the conversion of many positions from casual or informal to full time with benefits. Informal workers were thus able to join the ranks of the formally employed. In the Dominican Republic, the country's history of race-based discrimination against Haitian migrants created a barrier to cooperation. Labor unions struggled to unite informal Dominican workers with their undocumented counterparts from Haiti. Labor organizers not only sought to negotiate higher wages and better working conditions, but also lobbied the government to give legal status to Haitian workers.

In the case of self-employed workers, the other party required for negotiations is often a local government rather than an employer. In the former Soviet republic of Georgia, the livelihood of self-employed minibuses was threatened when local governments attempted to reform public transit. In one town, proposed regulations would have changed the transit routes, imposed higher standards for vehicle maintenance, and restricted the size of the transit fleet. Because each of these changes would have been extremely costly for self-employed minibus operators, the union organized a strike until negotiations could be held with the local government. In the case study of street vendors in Monrovia, Liberia, workers were subject to licensing fees, were barred from conducting business in certain parts of the city, and were continually harassed by local police. Only after years of struggle and securing the help of the nation's President was the street vendors' union able to negotiate an agreement with the Monrovia municipal government.

Reading through the volume reveals a number of other commonalities across the case studies. Often, unions had to overcome workers' initial distrust of labor organizations. Some workers feared retaliation from employers if they joined a union, while others were concerned that the unions might be secretly allied with employer interests (yellow unions, as in Cambodia) or might exist to siphon off some of their hard-earned wages. Another theme was that workers were often unaware of their rights. Labor organizers spent substantial time educating workers and creating awareness campaigns. In some cases, informal workers had lower societal status than the formally employed and encountered disrespect and harassment. One disturbing example of such behavior was how Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic were considered "indispensable but unwelcome." Similarly, female beer promoters in Cambodia were often sexually harassed or assumed to be sex workers.

Furthermore, many of the countries examined in the case studies did not have comprehensive labor laws, and existing laws often applied only to formal employment. Thus, labor organizations advocated for formalizing or directly hiring people who currently worked informally. A lack of enforcement of labor laws was another problem, as many of the local and national governments in these cases seemed more aligned with business interests than with worker protections. In Tunisia, it took a change in government leadership to bring about the opportunity for change in labor rights. It was only after the country's authoritarian regime was toppled in the 2011 Arab Spring that the

national labor federation found a sympathetic ear in the interim government. In other cases, it was international pressure—either from other governments or from international unions or nongovernmental organizations—that prompted changes. In Colombia, representatives of port workers pushed for changes on the basis of the stalled U.S.–Colombia Free Trade Agreement. These common threads in the case studies may provide insight on new directions for labor organizations.

This book added greatly to my understanding of the various forms of informal work and the difficulties that informal workers face in securing recognition and rights. However, certain passages were difficult to follow. The editors apparently assumed that readers would have a large working knowledge of labor relations, union terminology, and major players in the international labor scene. For example, I was unfamiliar with the Solidarity Center, which funded much of this volume’s research and was mentioned in multiple case studies. That slight criticism aside, I believe most readers will find the case studies engaging. I found particular emotional resonance with the tales of beer promoters in Cambodia and waste pickers in Brazil. In these cases and others, the editors explain how the labor organizations involved advocated for change on moral grounds, framing the struggle in terms of justice and fairness.

Although the editors make no specific policy recommendations, their book is both informative and subtly persuasive. In the introduction, the editors make a case for “broadening labor’s repertoire,” challenging the traditional idea that collective bargaining can only occur between formal workers’ unions and employers. By the end of the book, it is evident that collective bargaining can involve many categories of both formal and informal workers, government entities, and employer representatives. The way forward may be slow, but these case studies show that progress is possible.