

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

My Boss Is A Robot: A Special Series on App-Based

Episode 6: Driving Toward a Fair Future

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guests: Sarah McKenzie, Solidarity Center program coordination director; Andrew Tillet-Saks, Solidarity Center Organizing Director

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So you're fed up with your job. You and your co-workers are being treated unfairly. You decide it's time to do something about it. You want to organize at your workplace. For app-based platform workers, though, these questions can be really complicated. For one thing, there is no central workplace. Gig work is isolating by design. So what do we do? This is where our show begins today. This is My Boss Is a Robot, a podcast about platform work from the Solidarity Center. I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. I am the executive director of the Solidarity Center.

This is part two of our toolkit episode, where we'll try to cover the topics we missed with John J. Chan and Josua Mata, two organizers on the ground in the Philippines. Today we take the bird's eye approach with two of our stellar organizers within the Solidarity Center. Sarah McKenzie is our director of Program Strategy and Innovation and has 29 years of experience in the labor movement. Welcome, Sarah.

Sarah McKenzie:

Hello, Shawna.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Andrew Tillett-Saks serves as the Solidarity Center's Trade Union Strengthening director and has experience organizing workers in both the U.S. and around the globe. Thanks for joining us, Andrew.

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

Hi, Shawna. Thanks for having.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Why does this work matter to both of you? Why should anyone care?

Sarah McKenzie:

After COVID, we saw a massive increase in platform-based work, app-based work. When we think about the future of work, that's where we see it headed. If we're going to make sure that workers' rights are upheld and that we continue to create decent workplaces, we've got to care. We've got to care about where the work is going and where the workers are.

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

I completely agree with Sarah. This is a tactic being used by employers specifically to disempower workers and to try to break and prevent worker organization. If the labor movement doesn't figure out how to organize platform workers en masse, it's going to spell bad consequences for the entire labor movement, platform and non-platform. I think employers will continue to shift more and more toward this organization work if they think it's a way to avoid having to be accountable to their workers, a way to avoid labor unions. So I think in terms of trying to build the whole global labor movement, it's really the nut that the global labor movement has to crack.

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All right. The stakes are extremely high, it sounds like. So let's just figure this out together. What do we do? What are the first steps in organizing? You're a platform worker. You're working in ... Pick any country. A bunch of you together. You're facing terrible working conditions. What are the first main phases of organizing?

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

What we've seen from watching workers organize in the platform sector around the world is that they're using some of the tried-and-true tactics of organizing workers in the labor movement. They're also innovating with some new tactics. One of the tactics organizing-wise that's been very successful is surveying workers. In terms of trying to start an organizing campaign, doing the survey of the workers you're trying to organize is an effective tactic to do two things. It gives you a sense of what the workers are concerned about, the working conditions, which is really essential. You have to really know what issues they care about because those are the things they're going to fight about. It's an organizing maxim, so you have to identify what they are.

One of the first steps I've seen in platform organizing that's somewhat new is the need to set up channels of communication, because typically, workers talk at the workplace. They're next to each other. They're in the same building oftentimes, or at least in the same hub. With platform workers and app-based workers, that's often not the case. So you have to, as a foundation, set up some way to communicate with a big group of people. In Thailand, delivery workers set up a Facebook page that ended up getting 35,000 followers. So they could communicate en masse whatever they wanted to. In other countries, they oftentimes set up WhatsApp groups, Telegram, Signal groups, some way that you can start the conversation. That becomes the foundation to build upon to build your organization. That's a really necessary first step.

Sarah McKenzie:

Going off of what Andrew said, though, when you look at traditional organizing, that worker-to-worker contact, talking to each other, they may do it differently than we do in some of our traditional organizing. But it's got to happen, that relationship building, because I was always wondering about this as we started organizing platform workers, whether or not they really needed to see each other, or is online good enough? At least, what I'm seeing more and more is they do. Build the relationship may start online, but they do want to see each other, and they do gather.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Based on platform workers organizing in other parts of the world, what seem to be some of the other most important elements to success?

Sarah McKenzie:

Also, we have to educate folks about this, educating people about their rights. But what's important about that is people can see, "Okay. These are the rights that we have now. What do we want to change? How do we change laws?" And, in doing that, being able to also educate the broader community around them, because they've got to get support for the legislation and their campaign.

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Andrew, what do people typically get wrong?

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

There's a lot of mobilizing, and not necessarily enough organizing. These initial groups get formed, whether it's a Facebook group or a WhatsApp group. Then the employers, as they tend to do, inevitably do something to piss all the workers off. Usually, in this sector, it's change the algorithm, so it's a wage cut. People are upset, and they call a protest. They can mobilize quite a few workers through these communications channels that they've set up. They'll get big protests, anywhere from 200 to 1,000 workers. The problem is, the stuff that's often skipped is building a real organizing structure. So what happens is, after the protest, things dissipate, whether that's because the employer retaliates, or it's just difficult to keep people together without a structure. So one of the most fundamental pieces of an organizing campaign is identifying your leaders and then building your committee, a committee that covers as much of the workplace as you can with a real structure. By structure, I mean you've got a leader who's responsible for 10 workers here, another leader who's recruited and responsible for 10 workers there.

Ideally, you should build out that tree, that organizing tree that makes the real backbone and the real structure to the unit. If you have that, when the employer retaliates, you can stay strong. If you have that, after you do one action, you can call a meeting amongst all the workers and make the next plan. Too many people, workers and organizers, have bought into the company's myth that somehow this workplace is so different that we can't necessarily build a real organizing structure like that. I don't think it's actually true. The Philippines are building very methodical committee structures. Workers in Nigeria are building very methodic committee structures.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Sarah, you've been doing this for 30 years. How do workers build this committee, identify leaders, start to take action, without getting exposed? How do they do it privately? What does that look like?

Sarah McKenzie:

Workers go to other workers that they trust. Every workplace has their own structure already of the people you go to for things, the people that everybody listens to. Those are the people that we identify to really be on those committees. These are the people who could say, "Yeah, I know 10 people. I even know 20 people who I can reach out to."

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Is there a need to be private, or does it not matter?

Sarah McKenzie:

Oh, I think it matters, especially when you know that you're working with a company that's not saying, "I'll be neutral." They don't want workers to have the power to weigh in on how it's running.

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

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Staying underground is very, very important because the second companies find out, they start pulling workers into captive audience meetings. They start really bearing down with all kinds of different intimidation tactics. But in this sector, what I've seen a little bit, managers and employers actually have a little bit less intrusive presence in the day-to-day work. Workers don't usually talk to a manager or an employer. They just do it all through the end. There's actually more space to talk openly about the organizing. I haven't actually seen too many campaigns get stopped because the employers start retaliating early, and it sends shivers through the organizing campaign like you see in other workplaces. I think unions and workers want to be careful about when they do their first action because you want to appear strong to other workers. You want to appear strong to the employer so that they retaliate a little bit less.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

We don't have to be like a secret underground cell. We're organizing in the same way we might in other more typical workplaces. Maybe talk us through that first action where you're showing strength. Showing strength to who? Do we use the media?

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

Using social media is incredibly effective from what I've seen, in terms of communicating to other workers. App-based workers are on their phones and on social media a lot. Form a Facebook page. If you broadcast the actions onto social media, that has a lot of impact in terms of inspiring other workers to see that, "Hey, people are fighting about the same issues that I care about. Whoa. There's a lot of them. This thing might actually have a chance we could get involved." I find social media in platform network organizing to be really effective, particularly in the organizing aspect of it. More traditional media is where the employers get really pissed off. So broadcasting those actions in the traditional media, getting real press coverage of it, puts pressure publicly on the employers. I think they really, really hate it. It's not particularly difficult to get media coverage on these companies because everybody uses these apps. Everybody gets delivery. Everybody takes app-based taxis and cars. So there's generally a thirst to cover them.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

All right. Sarah, when you think back on your decades of organizing experience, tell me about a time when workers did everything right. They built their committees. They built their activism among the workers. They kept it pretty tight. Then they came out publicly in some form for the first time. Tell me about something like that.

Sarah McKenzie:

I did a lot of healthcare organizing. I was organizing this one hospital where we were able to build the committee. There were so many issues in this hospital. We were able to build the committee. The committee decided that they were going to come out. All the committees signed the usual letter to the management asking to be recognized as a union. Then they made these signs. In the middle of the day, they walked down. They did it right before lunch so they can get the majority of the people looking, and other people could join it. They took a long walk around the hospital. They walked down to the management's office. The manager was actually in the office and would not let his secretary let them in.

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The workers didn't leave. Other workers joined them when they were walking. It just gave the sense of the workers had a lot of power. Then, when the workers went in, they saw that the manager was scared to meet with them. That got them hyped even more. They didn't leave. Finally, the manager came out. They handed him the letter, and he wouldn't take it. He's like, "I'm not touching that." They were like, "It's just a piece of paper." The power that they felt, it was amazing. When they walked out, they literally walked out in front of the hospital, and they were just really rejoicing. It was amazing to watch them come out of there.

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

A good first action going public, you have two main goals. You want to show the employer that you're strong, and back off, don't retaliate, and you want to show other workers that you're strong to give them some courage to join. There was a very good first action amongst delivery riders in Thailand a couple of years ago. The most important thing is to have a big amount of workers themselves. They're delivering their demands. There's something about that face-to-face confrontation that is really emboldening for workers to see. It's really the first time that people have collectively, in most workplaces, stood up to their employer. That power dynamic, oftentimes, is changed forever.

So intentionally, to inspire the co-workers and to scare the employer as well, we tried to bring as many folks from other organizations as well, other unions, other riders from other companies, political figures, other NGOs, to show the company, "Hey, these guys are not alone in this fight." I do want to say, though, there's actually quite a few what we would call wildcat actions in the sector. Workers, whether there are work stoppages or protests, you see them popping up amongst drivers, delivery workers, other platform app-based workers. My sense is that's not actually the main challenge. The main challenge is turning those actions into lasting organizations that can grow over time and that over time can really fight to improve the working conditions.

I think it's that transition from a group of rightfully pissed off workers into an organization that has a revenue stream, that has a structure with elected leaders, has bylaws, and has participation amongst all of the rank-and-file members, that's the step that doesn't get taken in too many places. You asked before, Shawna, about what are the pitfalls? There's this trend in the sector to not want to form traditional units. I think that's fine. I don't think it really matters what you call it, a union, an association, a collective. But what is important is that you've got some real structure to the organization.

Usually, what that looks like is you build a team of what we call an organizing committee. Each member of that organizing committee has a specific assignment. It differs by workplace. That way, when you need to mobilize people for an action because the companies just changed the algorithm and minimum wage, you've got a reliable, systematic structure in place that you can do so. For example, delivery riders, I'll talk to them. I'll say, "Hey, how could we systematically break down who talks to who, or whose assignment is what? Because it's not the same as a hotel, or it's not the same as a factory.

Hotels, they do it by department, so housekeeping, the kitchen, the front desk. You'll have a committee person, at least one for each one of them. What I've seen amongst delivery riders is they do it by rest stop. Typically, riders rest at the same stop. There's like 10 to 20 of them. So you want to first identify where they all are in an area. Then you need to recruit one committee leader for each one who takes responsibility for that stop. You got to talk to them and then really use their knowledge of the workplace about how they should divide it up. They'll know how best to do it, but the basic idea stays the same. You've got leaders assigned to different parts of the workforce, so we can have collective action,

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collective meetings, and really move like a union. It's going to take time. It's going to take a lot of fights, a lot of different actions, a lot of meetings, to actually change this sector.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, that's really the issue. This sector is new. There isn't a long history of institutions defending workers, working-class people, in this sector, compared to Sarah's example of healthcare organizing. Where do workers go to get information about how to organize in this sector? I mean, is there information online?

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

In most countries around the world, there are worker organizations who are trying to drive it. If you are a worker in the sector and you want to organize, I would bet that there's probably a worker at the organization who's pretty savvy at organizing, has got a lot of experience, who's trying to at least poke around and start organizing. Do a little bit of research. Try to get in touch with your local organization that is working on this.

Sarah McKenzie:

I would also add that if you just want basics of organizing, also, you can go to either the global union federations or International Trade Union Confederation, and more importantly, yes, the Solidarity Center, because we're actually on the ground in each various country. Literally getting on the phone and calling us, and we're able to help you with those things. We've got all different phone numbers in the more than 30 countries we work in. You really have to just look for the Solidarity Center in that country. Or you can go online to our website at solidaritycenter.org, and you could see which countries we're actually working in.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Sarah, folks anywhere in the world could find the local Solidarity Center office and reach out. Are there other ways that folks can get in touch with us?

Sarah McKenzie:

Yes, they could call our DC office. The number's 202, plus one, 202-974-8383. If you are in another country on another continent, time zone differences, you can definitely leave a message for us. We'll get back in touch with you. Or better yet, you can just email us at information@solidaritycenter.org. That's probably the best way. We'll get back in touch with you and connect you with our local office.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

To close, what advice would you give riders and platform workers who want to organize together for better working conditions?

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

Union organizing is really not a lot about expertise. It's about having a group of workers who have courage and a willingness to really fight. If you have that, you can win. You can fight as big of an

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employer as Inditex or Zara, or in the platform sector, some of these other mega corporations like Uber. My advice from this story to workers, any platform workers listening to this, is don't worry if you don't have experience. Don't worry if you don't consider yourself an expert. Don't be intimidated by that. Expertise is not the main ingredient of a successful organizing camp. It's having a group of workers who have courage and a commitment to do the organizing themselves. If you have that, and you combine that with some collective action, you can form a union, and you can win concrete improvements at the job.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

One of the most powerful things I ever did was go to Bangladesh right about one year after the terrible industrial disaster, industrial homicide of the Rana Plaza building collapse. We met directly with workers right around that collapsed building. I was there about a year later. Workers were still visiting the site. I met this woman. She said to me, "I was a union organizer before Rana Plaza. When I walked in my neighborhood, people looked down on me. They said I shouldn't be doing that work in the evening because I'm female. They criticized my family. My family was even embarrassed. After Rana Plaza, everyone in our community knows that it was the unions after that disaster who pointed out that workers that day had to walk into the building because their employer said, 'If you don't come in today, you're not going to be paid for a month.' Nobody cannot get paid for a month in Bangladesh on those low salaries at the time. So workers went into the factory, and they died. 1,100 people died that day."

She said, "Now that we've made that public, and I say, 'I'm a union organizer,' people look up to me. My family is proud of me. My community lifts me up. Those men at the company that used to tell me that I was cute, insult me because I was female, they now have to sit across the table from me and bargain over wages and working conditions." I'll never forget that. The world tells low-wage people that they don't have power. They don't have voice. They're not equal citizens. They can't make change. People can absorb that over the course of their life. But through a union organizing campaign, people see that's just not true. It transforms them and their lives. It transforms the workplace. It transforms the community. That's what can lead to more democracy and more fairness in a society.

Andrew Tillett-Saks:

When we fight to change, the only thing we're guaranteed to change is ourselves. In union struggle, that's absolutely true. I've been a part of union struggles that won CBAs and union recognition. I've been a part of a lot of union struggles that haven't. But the one thing that's common across all of them is when workers stand up to try to win a voice on the job and some respect, they're reclaiming their own dignity. In a non-union workplace, you have to be subservient. You have to be submissive, oftentimes worse than that. You have to get denigrated by your employer, let's be honest. When workers start to say, "No, we're not going to take it," they really are reclaiming their own dignity as human beings, whether you win a CBA or not. We want to. But even if you don't, the employer can't take that away from us.

I think it's important for workers to have the mindset that the employers don't get to decide when we're a union. The government and the law doesn't get to decide when we're a union. We decide as workers when we're a union. We're coming together to demand respect and demand that we get listened to as equals. If we take that approach over time, we're going to lose some of the battles along the way, but we have to keep fighting with these nasty platform corporations. Over time, workers do have the power. Workers do have the courage to win.

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Sarah McKenzie:

When you're in that room with workers whether they win their union or they win a collective bargaining agreement that's fair, the feeling of all of that coming together, people are happy, but the atmosphere in the room, it's like no other. You feel the power. There's nothing like it. It's the most amazing thing you've ever seen when people take their power back, and collectively.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thanks to our special guests from the Solidarity Center, Sarah McKenzie and Andrew Tillett-Saks. I'm Shawna Bader-Blau, executive director at the Solidarity Center. This is the last episode of our series, My Boss Is a Robot, a podcast about the gig economy and the rise of the apps. Be sure to check out the other five episodes on this same platform. Thanks for listening.