

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRANSPORT UNIONISM IN LAGOS STATE: IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKERS, COMMUTERS AND URBAN MOBILITY

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Abstract

The rapid diffusion of smartphones, mobile applications, digital payments, GPS-enabled navigation, online platforms and algorithmic management is transforming the organisation of urban transport and the character of labour relations in Lagos State, Nigeria. For decades, transport unionism in Lagos State has been closely associated with informal public transport, motor parks, route allocation, fare collection, worker discipline and collective representation. The emergence of digital mobility platforms, particularly e-hailing services, has introduced new organisational arrangements in which passenger demand, pricing, driver allocation, performance evaluation and payment are increasingly mediated through digital technologies. This transformation creates opportunities for greater efficiency, transparency, accessibility and formalisation, but it also introduces new forms of worker surveillance, income uncertainty, algorithmic control and fragmentation of collective representation. This paper examines how digital technology is reshaping transport unionism in Lagos State and evaluates the implications for transport workers, commuters and urban mobility. Drawing on recent literature on informal transport, platform work, algorithmic management, labour organisation and Lagos State transportation, the paper adopts a qualitative conceptual review approach. The analysis demonstrates that digitalisation does not necessarily eliminate transport unionism; rather, it changes the sources, mechanisms and sites of worker power. Traditional physical organisation around garages and motor parks is increasingly complemented by digitally mediated organisation through WhatsApp groups, social media, mobile communication and platform-based networks. The paper argues that the future of transport unionism in Lagos State will depend on its capacity to move from predominantly territorial and gatekeeping functions towards digitally enabled representation, social protection, skills development, data governance and constructive participation in transport regulation. It recommends an inclusive regulatory framework that recognises platform workers as legitimate transport stakeholders, promotes social dialogue, protects workers against exploitative algorithmic practices, improves commuter protection and integrates informal and digital transport operators into metropolitan mobility planning.

Keywords: digital technology, transport unionism, Lagos State, platform work, e-hailing, informal transport, labour relations

Introduction

Transport is central to the economic and social functioning of Lagos State. As one of Africa's largest metropolitan regions, Lagos State depends on a complex combination of formal and informal mobility systems to connect workers, businesses, households, markets and institutions. Conventional public transport includes buses and rail services, while informal and semi-formal

transport has historically been dominated by minibuses, taxis, motorcycles and other forms of paratransit. Informal minibus services remain particularly important because they respond flexibly to passenger demand and reach locations that conventional mass transit systems may not adequately serve. Alcorn and Karner (2021) demonstrate that informal transit continues to account for a substantial proportion of mobility in Lagos State and argue that the adaptive characteristics of informal transport can complement more formalised public transport systems.

The organisation of informal transport has traditionally involved powerful occupational and territorial institutions. Transport unions have historically played multiple roles, including representing drivers, organising motor parks, regulating routes, collecting dues, resolving disputes and interacting with public authorities. Although these functions have often been contested, the union remains an important institutional feature of the transport economy. The importance of collective organisation becomes particularly evident when transport workers confront government policies, regulatory changes, fare restrictions, taxation, vehicle requirements or other interventions that affect their livelihoods (Adesuyi et al., 2024).

Digital technology is now introducing a qualitatively different dimension to this institutional landscape. Mobile phones, smartphones, GPS, electronic payments, social media, digital platforms and ride-hailing applications have altered the relationship between transport operators and passengers. Rather than depending exclusively on physical motor parks or roadside passenger acquisition, digital platforms can match drivers with passengers through algorithms. Pricing can be electronically determined, transactions can be recorded, customers can rate drivers and platform operators can monitor service delivery. The result is not simply technological improvement; it is a reorganisation of the labour process.

The Lagos State experience is especially important because the city simultaneously contains traditional informal transport structures and rapidly expanding digital mobility systems. E-hailing platforms entered the Nigerian market through Lagos State and have subsequently become part of the metropolitan transportation ecosystem. Cieslik et al. (2022), using a case study of 138 e-hailing drivers, found that platform work can improve access to customers and income opportunities while simultaneously exposing workers to long working hours, weak labour standards and inadequate social protection. Importantly, the authors also found evidence of organised labour movements among platform drivers.

This evidence challenges the assumption that digital technology necessarily weakens collective worker organisation. Instead, digital technology can produce new forms of worker solidarity while simultaneously fragmenting the conventional employment relationship. The central question is therefore not whether digital technology will destroy transport unionism, but how transport unionism will adapt to a labour environment in which workers are increasingly connected digitally but may be geographically dispersed, formally independent and algorithmically managed.

This paper examines that transformation through three interconnected dimensions. First, it considers the changing nature of transport work and worker organisation. Second, it evaluates the implications of digitalisation for commuters and the quality of urban mobility. Third, it

examines the implications for governance and proposes a framework for the future of transport unionism in Lagos State.

Conceptualising Transport Unionism in the Digital Era

Transport unionism can be understood as collective organisation through which transport workers pursue economic, social, professional and political interests. Traditional union structures generally depend on relatively identifiable workplaces, occupational identities and physical interaction among workers (Adesuyi, 2024). Transport unionism differs from factory-based unionism because transport workers are geographically mobile and may operate as individual entrepreneurs, owner-drivers, hired drivers or members of informal networks.

Digitalisation changes this institutional environment by separating worker organisation from physical proximity. A driver no longer needs to be physically present in a motor park to communicate with hundreds of colleagues. Mobile messaging applications can enable rapid dissemination of information about fares, government policies, security incidents, road closures, protests and industrial actions. Social media can also connect drivers across routes and metropolitan boundaries.

The literature on digital unionism suggests that digital technologies can enhance the visibility, aggregation and addressability of trade unions. Hennebert et al. (2021), examining 13 Canadian trade unions, argue that digital technologies provide unions with organisational concordances that can strengthen communication, mobilisation and member engagement. Their argument is particularly relevant to Lagos State because the spatially dispersed character of transport workers makes digital communication potentially more important than conventional workplace communication.

Digitalisation, however, also produces organisational risks. Platform workers may have no common physical workplace, may work for different platforms simultaneously and may not consider themselves employees. Their relationship with a platform may be mediated by contractual arrangements rather than conventional employment relationships. This makes traditional collective bargaining more difficult.

Köhler (2021) argues that platform work presents major challenges to conventional union organising because workers are fragmented and the employment relationship is often ambiguous. Nevertheless, the platform economy has also generated new forms of collective organisation. Digital communication can therefore be understood as both a source of fragmentation and a source of mobilisation.

For Lagos State transport unionism, this duality is fundamental. Digitalisation can weaken the traditional importance of the motor park as the primary location of coordination while simultaneously creating new digital spaces for collective action.

Theoretical Framework

The paper draws principally on the labour process perspective and the power resources approach to worker organisation. The labour process perspective is useful because digital platforms do not merely connect passengers and drivers; they also reorganise how work is allocated, monitored and evaluated.

Traditional transport work involved visible forms of managerial and institutional control. A driver interacted with vehicle owners, union officials, passengers, police officers, traffic regulators and motor-park authorities. Digital platforms introduce a different form of control in which algorithms can determine trip allocation, calculate prices, monitor performance and evaluate drivers.

Möhlmann et al. (2021) demonstrate that online labour platforms employ algorithms not only for matching workers with customers but also for controlling work. Their study of Uber drivers shows that algorithmic management can generate tensions concerning work execution, compensation and workers' sense of belonging.

Adekoya et al. (2025) extend this argument to the Nigerian context. Based on interviews with 46 platform drivers and three platform managers, they find that algorithmic management has significant implications for employment relationships, while drivers simultaneously value flexibility, autonomy and income opportunities. The Nigerian evidence is particularly important because it demonstrates that platform workers experience digital control and economic opportunity at the same time.

The power resources approach complements labour process theory by explaining how workers can convert their collective position into bargaining power. In traditional transport systems, worker power can arise from control over routes, vehicles, garages, passenger access and the ability to disrupt mobility. In digital transport systems, these resources are changing. Workers may instead derive power from collective digital communication, coordinated log-offs, strikes, customer relationships, platform ratings, access to alternative platforms and public visibility.

Recent research on African ride-hailing workers provides strong support for this argument. Anwar (2025) shows that African ride-hailing drivers increasingly use self-organised networks and digital communication channels such as WhatsApp and Facebook to develop solidarity and exert worker power. The study demonstrates that digital networks can create forms of collective action outside established trade-union structures.

Consequently, digital technology should not be interpreted as inherently anti-union or pro-union. Its effects depend on how workers, unions, platforms and governments appropriate and regulate the technology.

Digital Transformation of Transport Work in Lagos State

The first major transformation concerns the relationship between drivers and passengers. Conventional informal transport often depends on physical passenger concentration at motor parks, bus stops and roadside locations (Adesuyi, 2022). Digital platforms introduce electronic

matching, enabling passengers to request vehicles remotely. This changes the economics of passenger acquisition and reduces some of the importance of physical locations.

The second transformation concerns pricing. In conventional informal transport, fares can be negotiated or determined through established route structures. Digital platforms use technological systems to establish or influence fares and communicate prices to passengers and drivers. This can improve transparency from the passenger's perspective but can also reduce the ability of drivers to negotiate individually.

The third transformation concerns information. GPS technology enables drivers and passengers to access real-time information concerning location and routes. Digital platforms can also generate data on trip volumes, demand patterns, driver activity and customer ratings. Cieslik et al. (2022) argue that such digital records could potentially assist the gradual formalisation of transport work by providing evidence of income regularity and economic activity.

The fourth transformation concerns monitoring. Traditional transport work involves direct human observation, whereas platform work increasingly relies on digital surveillance. Ratings, acceptance rates, cancellation rates, trip histories and other performance indicators can influence a driver's continued access to the platform.

The fifth transformation concerns occupational identity. The conventional transport worker may identify primarily as a member of a union, route association or occupational group. The platform driver may instead identify simultaneously as an independent contractor, entrepreneur, app user, driver partner and member of a digital community. This creates a more complex form of worker identity.

Implications for Transport Workers

The consequences of digital transformation for workers are mixed. One important benefit is increased access to customers. Digital platforms reduce some of the uncertainties associated with searching for passengers and may reduce idle time. For drivers who previously depended entirely on roadside passenger acquisition, digital matching can potentially improve utilisation of vehicles.

Digital platforms can also increase economic flexibility. Drivers can often decide when to log into a platform and may combine platform driving with other economic activities. Adekoya et al. (2025) found that flexibility and autonomy are important motivations for Nigerian platform workers.

Another potential advantage is access to financial and insurance services. Cieslik et al. (2022) found that platform affiliation can provide access to insurance, credit and other forms of financial support that may not be readily available to workers operating entirely within the informal economy.

Digital records may also help transport workers become more visible to financial institutions and public authorities. A driver with electronically documented income may potentially demonstrate creditworthiness more easily than a worker whose earnings are entirely cash-based.

However, these benefits coexist with significant vulnerabilities. Platform workers may be responsible for vehicle acquisition, fuel, maintenance, insurance, data costs and other operating expenses while having limited influence over fares and commissions. The formal independence of the worker may therefore coexist with substantial technological control.

The problem of social protection is equally important. Cieslik et al. (2022) found that platform work in Lagos State remains embedded in the informal economy and generally lacks adequate labour standards and social protection. Workers may therefore experience flexibility without security.

The issue of working time is particularly significant. When earnings depend on completing sufficient numbers of trips, drivers may respond by increasing working hours. The technological ability to remain continuously connected to the platform can therefore generate a paradox: technology increases flexibility but may simultaneously intensify work.

Digital ratings also introduce psychological and economic pressures. A worker's continued access to passengers may depend on customer evaluations, while the criteria used by algorithms may not always be transparent. Algorithmic management can therefore transform the traditional relationship between worker and supervisor into a relationship between worker and technological system.

Transformation of Union Power

Digital technology is likely to transform rather than eliminate transport unionism in Lagos State. Traditional union power is heavily associated with physical organisation. Motor parks and garages provide spaces where workers interact, collect dues, resolve disputes and mobilise for collective action. Digital platforms potentially weaken the importance of these physical spaces by allowing drivers to organise virtually.

This does not necessarily imply the disappearance of unionism. Rather, unionism can become hybrid. A hybrid transport union would maintain physical structures while incorporating digital membership systems, mobile communication, electronic dues collection, digital dispute resolution, online education and data-driven advocacy.

Hennebert et al. (2021) show that digital technologies can strengthen union visibility, aggregation and communication. For Lagos State transport unions, these functions could be particularly valuable because workers are geographically dispersed across a large metropolitan area.

Digitalisation can also improve union accountability. Electronic membership records and digital financial systems can make it easier to monitor dues, services and welfare benefits. This could strengthen members' confidence in union institutions.

At the same time, digitalisation may expose unions to new competition. Workers can form informal WhatsApp groups or online associations without obtaining recognition from traditional unions. Such networks can mobilise workers rapidly and sometimes respond to issues more quickly than established organisations.

Anwar (2025) demonstrates that African ride-hailing drivers are increasingly developing self-organised networks outside established union structures. These networks can provide solidarity and mobilising capacity but may struggle to sustain long-term institutional representation.

The implication is that traditional unions cannot assume that workers will automatically remain within established organisational structures. Representation must increasingly be earned through services, responsiveness and effective advocacy.

Implications for Commuters

Digital transformation also affects commuters. The most immediate benefit is convenience. Digital platforms allow passengers to request transport remotely, receive estimated fares and identify drivers. This can reduce uncertainty associated with finding transportation.

Digital platforms can also improve accountability. Electronic trip records provide a traceable record of transactions, while passenger ratings can create incentives for better customer service. This potentially addresses some longstanding concerns about passenger safety and service quality.

Nevertheless, digital mobility does not automatically produce affordable transport. Algorithmic pricing can increase fares during periods of high demand. Passengers who depend on digital transport because conventional public transport is unavailable may therefore face higher mobility costs.

Digital exclusion is another concern. Not all commuters possess smartphones, reliable internet access, electronic payment facilities or sufficient digital literacy. Consequently, an urban transport system that becomes excessively dependent on digital platforms may reproduce inequality.

The issue is especially important in Lagos State because informal transport serves diverse socioeconomic groups. The continued importance of informal transport reflects gaps in formal transit provision and the ability of informal operators to respond to passenger demand. Alcorn and Karner (2021) therefore argue for approaches that combine the adaptive characteristics of informal transport with the strengths of formal systems rather than simply attempting to eliminate informal operators.

Digitalisation should consequently complement, rather than replace, inclusive public transport.

Implications for Urban Mobility

From the perspective of urban mobility, digital technology creates opportunities for better coordination. Transport authorities can potentially use anonymised platform data to understand passenger demand, congestion patterns, route utilisation and mobility gaps.

This is particularly important because informal transport has historically been difficult to incorporate into conventional transport planning. Digital records can make previously invisible activities more measurable. The resulting data could improve route planning, emergency management, traffic management and infrastructure investment.

However, the use of private platform data raises questions concerning data ownership and governance. Transport authorities may become dependent on information controlled by private technology companies. This creates a new form of infrastructural dependence.

A balanced governance model should therefore require platforms operating in Lagos State to share appropriate aggregated mobility information with regulators while protecting individual privacy and commercially sensitive information.

The regulation of motorcycles provides an instructive example. Ackrill (2023) shows that motorcycle taxis constitute an important part of Lagos State mobility but are subject to contested regulation and enforcement. Digital platforms such as Gokada have also demonstrated how technology can be used to register, monitor and organise motorcycle taxi operations.

The challenge is therefore to move from a regulatory philosophy based primarily on prohibition and enforcement towards one based on registration, professionalisation, safety, data and integration.

Digital Technology and Worker Collective Action

One of the most significant developments in Lagos State is the emergence of digitally coordinated worker action. The 2020 protests by e-hailing drivers illustrate this transformation. Cieslik et al. (2022) document a week-long protest by Lagos State e-hailing drivers against proposed service taxation and note the involvement of organised driver associations. The episode demonstrates that digitally connected workers can mobilise rapidly around common economic grievances.

The significance of this development extends beyond e-hailing. It indicates a possible transition from traditional transport unionism towards networked worker organisation. Workers can simultaneously belong to a formal union, a professional association, a platform-specific group and multiple informal digital communities.

Such networked unionism can be faster and more flexible than traditional structures. A policy announcement can be communicated almost immediately to thousands of drivers. Workers can coordinate meetings, protests or collective bargaining strategies without assembling physically.

Nevertheless, digital mobilisation has limitations. Online groups can fragment rapidly, and leadership legitimacy may be uncertain. Digital activism can produce short-term mobilisation without creating durable institutions capable of negotiating long-term agreements.

The strategic challenge for unions is therefore to convert digital mobilisation into sustainable representation.

Towards a New Model of Transport Unionism in Lagos State

The emerging evidence suggests that Lagos State requires a new model of transport unionism based on five complementary principles.

The first is digital representation. Transport unions should establish professionally managed digital platforms through which members can register, pay dues, access information, report grievances and participate in decision-making. Such systems should supplement physical structures rather than eliminate them.

The second is social protection. Unionism should increasingly focus on insurance, pensions, health protection, accident compensation, emergency assistance and financial inclusion. These services are particularly important for workers operating under non-standard employment arrangements.

The third is professionalisation. Digital transformation requires new skills. Drivers need training in digital literacy, customer relations, road safety, cybersecurity, financial management, vehicle technology and data protection. Unions can become major providers of continuing professional education.

The fourth is collective bargaining in the platform economy. Traditional collective bargaining assumes an identifiable employer. Platform work complicates this assumption. Unions must therefore develop mechanisms for negotiating with platform companies, vehicle owners, regulators and other relevant actors simultaneously.

The fifth is participatory transport governance. Transport unions should become institutional partners in mobility planning rather than being treated principally as obstacles to reform. Alcorn and Karner (2021) provide an important basis for this approach by recommending stronger operator associations through which government can engage informal transport operators.

Policy Recommendations

The Lagos State Government should establish a formal social-dialogue framework bringing together transport unions, e-hailing associations, platform companies, commuter representatives, vehicle owners, labour authorities and transport regulators. This would provide a structured mechanism for negotiating fares, taxation, licensing, safety and worker protection.

The regulatory framework should also recognise platform drivers as legitimate transport workers irrespective of whether they are classified as employees, independent contractors or another legal

category. Classification should not become a mechanism for denying basic labour and social protections.

Government should require digital transport platforms to maintain transparent mechanisms for explaining major decisions affecting drivers, including deactivation, commission changes, pricing changes and account restrictions. Algorithmic decisions with significant economic consequences should be subject to accessible review procedures.

Transport unions should be encouraged to establish digital membership and service platforms. These systems should provide electronic registration, digital identification, welfare services, training, insurance facilitation, dispute reporting and communication.

The state should also develop a framework for responsible transport-data sharing. Aggregated and anonymised data should support transport planning, congestion management and infrastructure development, while individual privacy and commercial confidentiality should be protected.

A further priority should be the development of portable social protection arrangements. Because platform workers may move between platforms or combine several forms of employment, social protection should follow the worker rather than being tied exclusively to a particular employer or platform.

Finally, digitalisation should not become a justification for eliminating informal transport without providing viable alternatives. Informal transport remains economically significant because it responds to mobility gaps. The policy objective should therefore be progressive formalisation and integration rather than abrupt displacement.

Conclusion

Digital technology is fundamentally changing the organisation of transport work in Lagos State. The transformation extends beyond the introduction of e-hailing applications. It involves changes in passenger acquisition, pricing, information, monitoring, worker identity, labour relations and collective organisation.

The central argument of this paper is that digitalisation does not make transport unionism obsolete. Rather, it changes the institutional environment in which unionism operates. Traditional transport unionism was constructed around physical proximity, occupational identity and territorial control. Digital unionism is increasingly characterised by connectivity, data, networked solidarity and platform-mediated labour relations.

The Lagos State experience demonstrates the complexity of this transition. Digital platforms can provide workers with access to customers, income opportunities, flexibility, insurance and financial services. At the same time, they can generate longer working hours, algorithmic control, weak social protection and uncertainty regarding employment status. The same technology that enables worker surveillance can also facilitate worker mobilisation.

For commuters, digitalisation can improve convenience, traceability and service quality, but it can also create affordability and digital-access challenges. For urban mobility, digital platforms provide valuable data and coordination capabilities, but they also create new questions about private control of public mobility information.

The future of transport unionism in Lagos State should therefore not be conceived as a choice between traditional unions and digital platforms. A more productive approach is to construct a hybrid institutional model in which transport unions use digital technologies to strengthen representation while governments integrate informal and platform-based transport into metropolitan planning.

The most successful transport unions of the future are likely to be those that move beyond the narrow functions of route control and dues collection and become institutions of professional development, social protection, digital representation, data governance and policy advocacy. In this sense, digital technology presents not merely a threat to transport unionism but an opportunity for institutional renewal.

The policy objective should consequently be to ensure that technological innovation serves workers and commuters rather than simply transferring economic and regulatory power from traditional transport institutions to private digital platforms. A socially sustainable digital mobility system for Lagos State must combine technological efficiency with worker protection, commuter rights, institutional accountability and inclusive urban governance.

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