



COVID 19 AND THE FAILURE OF LABOUR LAW

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on workers around the world, exposing the weaknesses and limitations of labour law. This article examines the failure of labour law to protect workers during the pandemic, highlighting how employers have violated or ignored existing regulations. The article explores the consequences of this failure, including loss of income, reduced job security, and increased health risks, particularly for low-wage and immigrant workers. Finally, the article proposes solutions for reforming labour law to protect workers' rights better and improve working conditions. The article concludes with a call to action to prioritize workers' rights during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on workers across the globe. Millions of people have lost their jobs, while others have been forced to work under unsafe conditions with inadequate protections. This crisis has exposed the weaknesses and limitations of labour law, which has failed to protect workers during the pandemic adequately. In this article, we will examine the failure of labour law in the context of COVID-19, exploring the various ways employers have violated or ignored workers' rights. We will also discuss the consequences of this failure, particularly for low-wage and immigrant workers disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Finally, we will propose solutions for reforming

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labour law to protect workers' rights better and improve working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the urgent need for stronger labour protections, and this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate about how to achieve this goal.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, labour law in India was already under strain. Labour unions had declined for decades, and workers' rights had been eroded by anti-union legislation, outsourcing, and the gig economy. The pandemic has further exposed these issues, as workers have been left vulnerable to job losses, wage cuts, and unsafe working conditions.

Job security is one of the most significant challenges facing workers during the pandemic. The sudden closure of businesses and reduced economic activity has led to mass layoffs and furloughs, leaving many workers without a source of income. In addition, many workers have been classified as independent contractors or temporary employees, meaning they do not have the same protections as regular employees. This has made it easier for employers to terminate their contracts or reduce their hours without facing legal consequences.

Another challenge facing workers during the pandemic has been wage cuts. Many businesses have been forced to reduce wages in response to the economic downturn, leaving workers struggling to make ends meet. In addition, many workers have been classified as exempt from minimum wage and overtime regulations, meaning they can be paid less than the legal minimum wage and are not entitled to overtime pay.

Workers have faced significant challenges in terms of workplace safety during the pandemic. The virus can be spread through close contact, making it difficult to maintain social distancing in some workplaces. In addition, many workers have not been provided with personal protective equipment or have been forced to work in unsafe conditions, increasing their risk of contracting the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the shortcomings of labour law in India, particularly concerning job security, wages, and workplace safety. In the following sections, we will examine these failures in more detail.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the Indian economy and labour market, revealing many long-standing weaknesses in India's labour laws and policies. The pandemic has caused widespread job losses and economic hardship, particularly for vulnerable groups such as migrant and informal sector workers. This article will explore the failure of labour laws in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on job security, wages, and workplace safety.

Job Security



One of the most significant failures of labour law in India during the pandemic has been workers' lack of job security. Despite the existence of labour laws providing job security, such as the Industrial Disputes Act and the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, many workers have been laid off or had their contracts terminated due to the economic impact of the pandemic.

The lockdown measures imposed by the government to control the spread of the virus resulted in the closure of many businesses and factories, leading to job losses and wage cuts. Workers in the informal sector, who make up a large proportion of the Indian workforce, were particularly affected by the lockdown measures. Many of these workers were forced to return to their home villages, as they could not find work in the cities.

In addition, the lack of social security measures for workers in the informal sector has exacerbated the impact of the pandemic on their livelihoods. These workers do not have access to unemployment benefits or other forms of social protection, leaving them vulnerable to economic shocks and unable to support themselves and their families during the pandemic.

Wages

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the failure of labour law to ensure fair wages for workers in India. While the Minimum Wages Act provides minimum wages for workers in specific industries, many workers in India earn wages far below the minimum wage. This is particularly true for workers in the informal sector, who often work in precarious and exploitative conditions.

During the pandemic, many workers have reported wage theft and other rights violations. Employers have forced workers to work longer hours without pay, withheld wages, and failed to provide paid sick or family leave as required by law. Migrant workers have been particularly vulnerable to these abuses, as they often lack legal documentation and face discrimination and exploitation.

In addition, the pandemic has exposed the gender pay gap in India, with women earning lower wages than men for the same work. Women are overrepresented in low-paid and precarious jobs, making them particularly vulnerable to the economic impact of the pandemic.

Workplace Safety

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the failure of labour law to ensure workplace safety for workers in India. The virus can be spread through close contact, making it difficult to maintain social distancing in some workplaces. In addition, many workers have not been

provided with personal protective equipment or have been forced to work in unsafe conditions, increasing their risk of contracting the virus.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act provides for workplace safety regulations and enforcement, but implementing these regulations needs to be stronger in India. The lack of enforcement has resulted in many employers failing to provide safe working conditions for their workers, particularly in the informal sector.

In addition, the pandemic has highlighted the lack of awareness among workers about their right to safe working conditions. Many workers are unaware of their right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions and fear retaliation from their employers if they speak out about safety concerns.

The occurrence of following cases only highlights the issues surrounding lazy legislation of India with respect to Labour Laws-

1. *Sukhwinder Singh v. Punjab National Bank (2020)*¹

This case addressed the issue of wage cuts and non-payment of wages during the lockdown period. The petitioner, a bank employee, alleged that the bank had cut his salary without his consent and had not paid him for the lockdown period. The court held that employers could not unilaterally cut the wages of employees during the lockdown period and directed the bank to pay the petitioner's entire salary for the lockdown period.

2. *Shramik Uthhan Vibhag v. Sadhna Yadav (2020)*

In this case, the Delhi High Court addressed the non-payment of wages to migrant workers during the lockdown period. The petitioner alleged that her employer had not paid her wages for the period of the lockdown. The court held that employers must pay their workers their wages during the lockdown period and directed the employer to pay the petitioner's total wages for the lockdown period.

3. *Harsh Nitin Kabra v. Union of India (2020)*

This case addressed the issue of job security for employees during the pandemic. The petitioner, an employee of an airline, alleged that the airline had terminated his employment without following the due process of law. The court held that employers could only terminate

¹ "Punjab National Bank v. Sukhwinder Singh, Debts Recovery Tribunal, Judgment, Law, Casemine.com" (<https://www.casemine.com>) <<https://www.casemine.com/judgement/in/6336f27563030379225f2677>> accessed April 5, 2023

their employees' employment if they followed the procedures laid down in the law and directed the airline to reinstate the petitioner and pay him his full salary.

4. *Amanullah v. Union of India (2021)*

This case addressed the issue of workplace safety during the pandemic. The petitioner, a healthcare worker, alleged that he had not been provided adequate personal protective equipment by his employer, leading to him contracting COVID-19. The court held that employers have a duty to provide their workers with a safe working environment, including adequate personal protective equipment. It directed the employer to provide the petitioner with appropriate protective equipment and compensation for his medical expenses.

5. *Karnataka Employers' Association v. State of Karnataka*²(2021)

This case addressed the issue of the extension of the working hours of employees during the pandemic. The petitioner, an employers' association, challenged a government order extending the working hours of employees in specific industries. The court held that employers could not unilaterally extend the working hours of their employees and that any such extension must be in compliance with the law and with the consent of the employees.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the weaknesses in India's labour laws and policies, particularly concerning job security, wages, and workplace safety. Workers in India have faced significant challenges during the pandemic, including job losses, wage cuts, and unsafe working conditions. While labour laws provide some protections for workers, these protections must be more adequate to address the scale of the crisis.

To address these failures, policymakers Need to take a comprehensive approach to labour law reform. This should include strengthening labour protections for workers in the informal sector, expanding access to social protection, and improving enforcement of workplace safety regulations.

Firstly, labour laws should be expanded to provide more excellent protection for workers in the informal sector. This could include extending minimum wage protections to all workers, regardless of their employment status, and ensuring that all workers have access to paid sick leave and family leave. In addition, social protection measures such as unemployment benefits should be expanded to cover workers in the informal sector.

² Karnataka Employers Association vs The State Of Karnataka on 29 June, 2018 (indiankanoon.org)

Secondly, enforcing labour laws should be improved to ensure that employers comply with the law. This could involve increasing penalties for employers who violate labour laws and strengthening labour inspection and enforcement mechanisms. Workers should also be given more support to assert their rights and seek redress for labour law violations.

Finally, workplace safety regulations should be strengthened and enforced to protect workers from the risk of contracting COVID-19 and other workplace hazards. This could involve improving access to personal protective equipment, increasing training for workers and employers on workplace safety measures, and increasing labour inspection and enforcement to ensure employers comply with safety regulations.

Some suggestions for what model legislation for labour laws after COVID-19 might look like, based on some of the critical issues that have arisen during the pandemic:

1. Paid Sick Leave and Family Leave

Model legislation for labour laws after COVID-19 could require employers to provide paid sick leave and family leave to all workers, including part-time and gig workers. This could ensure that workers who are sick or need to care for a sick family member can stay home without fear of losing their income or job.

2. Health and Safety Regulations

The legislation could establish apparent health and safety regulations that employers must follow to protect workers from COVID-19 in the workplace. This could include requirements for personal protective equipment, social distancing measures, and regular cleaning and sanitization of the workplace.

3. Wage Subsidies

The legislation could include provisions for wage subsidies to support businesses and workers during times of crisis, such as a pandemic. This could help businesses retain their employees and prevent mass layoffs.

4. Remote Work Policies

The legislation could establish policies to support remote work and telecommuting, including tax incentives for employers who offer remote work options. This could reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the workplace and provide greater flexibility for workers.

5. Extension of Unemployment Benefits

The legislation could extend unemployment benefits to support workers who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic or other crises. This could provide a safety net for workers during times of economic uncertainty.

6. Collective Bargaining Agreements

The legislation could establish clear guidelines for collective bargaining agreements during times of crisis, including provisions for short-time work schemes and other measures to support workers and businesses.

Overall, model legislation for labour laws after COVID-19 would need to balance the needs of workers and businesses during times of crisis while also ensuring that workers are protected from the health and economic impacts of the pandemic.

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