

Pakistan: Trade unions' new challenge

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JUST six months before the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, trade unions had reiterated the urgency of protecting workers' rights on a global platform and warned against "an unprecedented level of income inequality, shrinking democratic space and an age of anger where corporations have too much power and people too little". This was at the 100th conference of the International Labour Organisation held in May 2019.

Then came the pandemic which wreaked havoc on peoples' lives and livelihoods across the board. In Asia-Pacific alone, about 81 million jobs were lost by December 2020. Cases of violations of workers and trade unions' rights with regard to lay-offs, working hours and the payment of wages increased manifold.

Though trade unions have weakened globally in the 21st century, their role is still considered vital in promoting equity and stability in society and their participation essential in tripartite and bipartite social policy dialogues. Trade union density across the world varies from high (90.4 per cent in Iceland) to medium (43.2pc in Egypt) to low (12.6pc in India) and very low (2.3pc in Pakistan).

The devastating impact of Covid-19 on the majority of workers should be a wake-up call for Pakistan.

Trade unions had never before confronted a task as daunting as to stand up for their fellow workers in the year of the Covid-19 virus. The pandemic proved a wake-up call for trade unions whose activities were severely impacted due to lockdowns and restrictive measures, and required innovative ways to provide support to fellow workers and access entitlements through collective bargaining power. Trade unions, angered but energised, have stood up to fight to retain the rights already gained and to mitigate the fallout of the infection on fellow workers.

For instance, in March 2020, the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union negotiated an agreement which guaranteed six weeks of full pay for 80,000 workers when the country went into lockdown. In April, the ILO Call to Action (Covid-19: Action in the Global Garment Industry) was negotiated between the International Organisation of Employers, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and IndustriALL Global Union to protect garment workers and set urgent priorities and specific commitments by the governments and employers.

In May, the trade unions in Brazil reached agreements on health and safety measures to fight the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace, allow at-risk workers to stay off-site, provide compulsory paid leave and temporary job security. In Tunisia, trade unions reached a tripartite agreement which ensured that workers receive full salaries, paid partly by employers and partly by the government in several sectors including the garment industries.

In many countries, the governments took measures to strengthen the existing tripartite mechanisms or established new forums to tackle the fallout of the pandemic.

In Argentina, informal workers were incorporated into a national dialogue forum through an

emergency social committee that was set up to tackle the issues of food security, income security and job security. In Pakistan, the government, employers and workers committed themselves to reactivating the dormant tripartite mechanism in Sindh. At the World Economic Forum which was held in the last week of January 2021, the trade unions demanded a New Social Contract for Recovery and Resilience based on the ILO Centenary Declaration which states that the fundamental rights at work and social protection comprising the Labour Protection Floor apply to all workers. Trade unions demanded that Covid-19 be recognised as an occupational disease.

The labour force in Pakistan entered the Covid-19 pandemic with a very low rate of union density, informal work conditions and weak labour protection. Trade unions are generally found in large-scale national and multinational companies. Textile and clothing is the largest sector employing 40pc of the labour force. Yet, the sector has the least number of trade unions and few have collective bargaining power.

The pandemic struck a blow to the global garments supply chain. Falling consumer demand led to cancelled orders. Production slowed down and the enterprises suffered losses. Negotiation with employers became even more difficult, as shared by a trade union member. The axe fell on contract workers who comprise about 80pc of the workforce in all enterprises, multinational or national.

A machine operator of an MNC textile factory told this writer that 32 contract workers were laid off in his unit a month before the lockdown was announced, but his employers maintained the remaining workforce, paid wages to all and quarantined (with full pay) workers aged 55 years and older for about seven months.

Workers in the majority of large enterprises and small and medium units have not been not so lucky. Massive lay-offs, non-payment of dues and pay cuts resulted in sporadic protests in front of the factories' gates. The trade union federations have been highlighting the impact of the pandemic on workers' lives through rallies, press conferences and meetings with state officials.

In Pakistan, where the rights to form a union and collective bargaining are severely curtailed due to repressive legislation and the conniving between the officials and the employers, many non-unionised workers seek support of federations active in their cities to help them negotiate with employers or seek legal remedy.

The devastating impact of Covid-19 on the majority of workers should be a wake-up call for Pakistan which excludes the majority of its citizens from protective measures against contingencies. Setting up a universal social protection floor should be the first remedial measure.

Pakistan has the basic infrastructure for social protection in place. A push from trade unions and political will from the state is required to ensure a universal social protection floor which is the provision of economic security and essential social services to all citizens — women, men, children — accessible to them throughout their life cycles and life contingencies (ie sickness or injury, war or pandemic).

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