

Statement of Working Peoples' Charter on Coronavirus Crisis in India

If India, with its brittle economy and even weaker healthcare infrastructure, is to survive the current Coronavirus pandemic without complete social, economic and physical breakdown, it will require drastic, radical and – most importantly – timely measures that are commensurate with the scale of the crisis. These measures must protect our people, in particular the most vulnerable – including the elderly, the sick and the poor – and the most vital of all – the informal workers – the backbone of the Indian economy.

While the current focus is understandably on health responses and social distancing, we cannot separate the health risk from the economic risk to working households. Indeed, both have a direct impact on the health of households. Workers fearing job retrenchment, working without economic and social support, and worrying about how to feed their families and earn an income, cannot, even if they wanted to, practice social distancing and responsible health practices. These are not choices they can make. Their social and economic conditions do not allow them the privilege of social distancing. Therefore, a comprehensive response to the pandemic is one that has its roots in both physical distancing and infection control with increased social protection and economic support to workers.

We cannot afford to act with indecision or to limit our imagination. All the old certainties and beliefs we had followed for years are being put into question. Countries like Spain have nationalized all healthcare facilities overnight and even capitalist economies like the US are talking about instituting universal basic income to support people in this crisis. We too must not waver, not get encumbered by old ways and old frameworks of thinking, and act rapidly and decisively before it is too late.

We, the representatives of trade unions and worker organisations of all sectors (including formal, informal, self-employed) are distressed to foresee the upcoming economic and social challenges and drastic consequences of

the COVID-19 pandemic on the informal sector workers such as domestic workers, daily wage workers, construction workers, brick making workers, manual scavenging workers, entertainment industry workers (like bar dancers et al.), street vendors, auto rickshaw workers, auto goods carrier workers, service industry workers particularly food & hospitality sector, restaurant workers. gig economy workers like delivery boys, Ola & Uber drivers, waste picker workers, home based workers etc.

The Working Peoples' Charter (WPC) represents the aspirations of more than 500 million working people, primarily in the informal sector, across the length and breadth of India: working in urban or rural, formal or informal sector, in wage employment, self employment, home-based and domestic employment, and includes all socially oppressed and excluded working people, whether earning a livelihood or not. We are heartened to see measures by state governments of Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand that have specific measures for formal and informal workers. We urge other state governments to rapidly follow suit.

In addition, however, we believe the Central Government must assist states to create the strongest emergency packages possible. The Central Government's announcement of creating a 'dedicated task force' to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic is a welcome one to address the economic concerns and vulnerabilities of the citizens of India. On behalf of the WPC, we make the following key recommendation:

The Central Government Task Force should create a Rs. 50,000 crores Emergency Workers Welfare Fund which can add to and complement the state relief packages and allow states with limited fiscal capacity to rely on central assistance.

How should this Fund be used? Emergency packages at both state and central level must bring together different forms of relief for workers. This Fund must be both *protective* as a response to current welfare shocks

which workers are facing as well as be *preventive* to build a foundation to prevent the next phase of economic vulnerability. It can be used for both direct and indirect support to workers. We detail the protective and preventive measures below.

Protective Measures: Cash and Non-Cash Transfers

- 1) Special PDS package to workers holding BPL and APL Card, which can sustain their food requirements at least for 3 months. This can also be supplemented through other state feeding institutions (government canteens or feeding centres), or through the subsidising of locally produced and distributed means by non-state actors.
- 2) All the workers holding BPL and APL cards should be given 'Immediate cash transfer' @ Rs 10,000 or minimum wages of one month.
- 3) Workers enrolled in MGNREGA and agricultural workers should get an upfront payment for 50 days of minimum wages, along with @ Rs 10,000 or minimum wages of one month.
- 4) Workers possessing 'construction worker welfare board card' should be given @ Rs 10,000 or minimum wages of one month.
- 5) Street vendors possessing licence for vending by municipal institutions or registration under shops and establishment act, or surveyed, challaned, trained by FSSAI, should be given @ 10,000 or minimum wages of one month.
- 6) Daily wage workers/migrant workers, domestic workers, waste picker workers carrying any worker organisation card such as Trade Union, Worker Collective or CSO should be given @ 10,000 or minimum wages of one month.

- 7) Auto rickshaw and tempo goods carrier workers possessing driving licence should be given @ 10,000 or minimum wages of one month.
- 8) Along with cash, all the workers also need to be provided with safety gears as required.

Preventive Measures: Securing Basic Necessities and Public Goods/Services

- 9) Freeze on eviction of homes, including evictions of tenants and mortgage payments.
- 10) Ban on reductions in workforce in small and medium enterprises, with payroll support to owners to cover losses with a condition that firms continue to service supply and vendor contracts.
- 11) Ban all price hikes and withdraw recent price hikes like on cooking cylinders.
- 12) We understand that a large number of health workers/scheme workers/Honorary workers will be accessing the honorarium, however their health will remain at high risk. We demand Rs 10 lakhs ex-gratia compensation in case of fatality, and reimbursement of entire medical expenditure.
- 13) Directed provision of evening clinics and temporary health infrastructure in informal/ migrant settlements should be made available as an emergency response, focussing on migrant population.

- 14) Safai karamcharis involved in third party contractual work must be provided statutory entitlements at par with organised sector workers, such as equal wages for equal work, EPFO, ESIC etc,
- 15) Special trains must be provided to ensure dignified transport to migrant workers in case the affected workers want to go back to their source states.
- 16) Urgent action to secure workers living in slums and informal settlements must be taken. Slum dwellers, majority of them working class, live in high density localities with poor sanitation, water shortages, and in proximity to sewage. These could become death traps and flash points for coronavirus expansion. There must be an immediate suspension of all evictions, demolitions and urgent regularization and proprietary rights for all low-income settlements. Immediate measures must also be taken to ensure sanitation and clean water provision in slums and low-income neighbourhoods.
- 17) Suspend utility bills: Suspension of utility bills payments for a period of at least two months for working and middle class income bracketed households should be enforced. Revise energy agreements for high and middle income groups to ensure uninterrupted energy supply in this period without hurting poor consumers.
- 18) Immediate measures must be taken to guard against price gouging & monopolization of all essential items, particularly medicine, food, sanitizers, masks, and medical equipment. Restrictions should be placed on the number of essential items people can buy at a time.
- 19) Counter burden on central and state reserves via increased GST on luxury items and land taxes.

- 20) Nationalised and private banks must create progressive lending instruments to ensure the expansion of affordable credit for SMEs & other businesses so that they can survive the crisis period.
- 21) Special and fast track courts to hear pleas of cases relating to domestic violence and other violence as a result of social distancing, self isolation, etc.
- 22) Create a national emergency helpline number for women and child safety in both private and public spaces. Create a protocol for immediate removal of the victim without putting the burden of proof.

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