

# CONTEMPT FOR LABOUR: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON DILUTION OF LABOUR LAWS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

At a time when everyone is awaiting an early end to the health and economic crisis caused by the [global pandemic](#), the interests of [labourers and workers](#) are once again set to be sacrificed. The revival of business and economic activity after weeks of forced closure is indeed a key objective to be achieved. However, it is amoral and perverse on the part of some States to address this need by granting sweeping exemptions from legal provisions aimed at protecting labourers and employees in factories, industries and other establishments. Madhya Pradesh has embarked on a plan to give a boost to business and industry by allowing units to be operated without many of the requirements of the Factories Act — [working hours may extend to 12 hours](#), instead of eight, and weekly duty up to 72 hours. Going by Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's remarks, it appears the State has used Section 5 of the Act, which permits exemption from its provisions for three months, in the hope that the Centre would approve such suspension for at least a thousand days. However, this exemption can be given only during a 'public emergency', defined in a limited way as a threat to security due to war or external aggression. Uttar Pradesh has approved an ordinance suspending for three years all labour laws, save a few ones relating to the abolition of child and bonded labour, women employees, construction workers and payment of wages, besides compensation to workmen for accidents while on duty. Reports suggest that several States are following their example in the name of boosting economic activity.

Changes in the manner in which labour laws operate in a State may require the Centre's assent. One hopes the Centre, which is pursuing a labour reform agenda through consolidated codes for wages, industrial relations and occupational safety, health and working conditions, would not readily agree to wholesale exemptions from legal safeguards and protections the law now affords to workers. The most egregious aspect of the country's response to the pandemic was its inability to protect the most vulnerable sections and its vast underclass of labourers from its impact. The emphasis in the initial phase was on dealing with the health crisis, even when the consequence was the creation of an economic crisis. While the country watches with horror the continuance of the collective misery of migrant workers well into the third spell of the national lockdown, the attitude of the ruling class towards labour remains one of utter apathy, bordering on contempt. Why else would a government relieve factories of even elementary duties such as providing drinking water, first aid boxes and protective equipment? Or suspend requirements such as cleanliness, ventilation, lighting, canteens, restrooms and crèches?

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