

THE G-20'S SCREEN OVER 'MAZDOORS', THEIR RIGHTS

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'By politicising the L20, the Indian government missed a chance to make a real difference in the lives of workers'. Photo: British High Commission via ANI

On September 9 Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reading of the final declaration of the G-20 Summit was a political win for him and a diplomatic victory for India. The African Union was granted G-20 membership, and a sense of togetherness among the Global South was palpable.

However, there were fears that a joint communiqué would not be issued as the Russia-Ukraine war was ongoing and the divided interests of the G-20 members would affect it. But Mr. Modi made it happen — he softened the language from the Bali G-20 document criticising Russia, kept Ukraine out of the summit, skipped the issue of fossil fuels, read out the 83 paragraphs of the New Delhi Declaration, and symbolically handed over the gavel to Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who will now preside over the G-20.

Unfortunately, India missed a great opportunity to protect worker rights and advance the welfare of workers during the G-20 summit, despite the G-20's Labour 20 (L20), a coalition of G20 leaders concerned about workers, holding two meetings in India.

It is a matter of concern that the L20 was headed by the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), a trade union affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In short, the L20 was politicised. India's choice of the BMS had irked the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), a confederation of global trade unions, and they boycotted the meetings.

In the past, the L20 has been headed by the ITUC. However, this time it was ignored and the chair was given to the BMS, which prioritises right-wing politics over workers' interests. This incident itself reveals how 'serious' the Indian government was about workers' issues at the G-20. The BMS is not an independent trade union. In the absence of the ITUC, the L20 discussed portable social security schemes, data collection for these schemes, addressing skill gaps in two meetings, and had some words on platform workers.

The Indian government should have taken the opportunity to address the serious issues facing workers in India, such as forced labour, modern-day slavery, and the kafala system in the Arab Gulf where some nine million Indians are working under exploitative working conditions. The

Arab Gulf countries follow an exploitative labour system called the kafala system, which ties migrant workers to their employers. This system makes it difficult for migrant workers to leave their jobs or change employers, and it increases the risk of forced labour and modern-day slavery.

By politicising the L20 with the BMS and ignoring the ITUC, the Indian government missed a chance to make a real difference in the lives of workers. Portable insurance schemes are important, but they are not enough. Workers also need job creation, decent working conditions, equal pay, gender equality, the elimination of forced labour and child labour, an end to modern-day slavery, and the protection of their rights and the welfare of their families.

It would have been a relief for the Indian working class, especially in the Arab Gulf, had these issues been prioritised and debated at the G-20. Saudi Arabia, which hosts over 2.5 million Indian workers, is a permanent member of the G-20. Oman and the United Arab Emirates, which were invited to the summit, have nearly 8,00,000 and 3.5 million Indian workers, respectively.

India is the world's largest migrant-sending country, with an estimated 13 million workers abroad. Of these, an estimated nine million are working in exploitative conditions in the Arab Gulf.

But the exploitation of Indian workers is not limited to the Arab Gulf. In India itself, workers in a number of industries, including textiles, brick kilns, shrimp farming, copper manufacturing, stone cutting, and plantations, face forced labour and modern-day slavery.

According to the Walk Free Foundation, there are an estimated 27 million people trapped in modern-day slavery in G-20 countries, of whom 11 million are in India.

Many would be surprised with the term forced labour and modern-day slavery. According to the International Labour Organization, forced or compulsory labour is "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily".

It must be noted that India has signed and ratified the ILO's Forced Labour Convention known as C29.

In other words, forced labour is different from substandard or exploitative working conditions. Various indicators can be used to ascertain when a situation amounts to forced labour, such as restrictions on workers' freedom of movement, withholding of wages or identity documents, physical or sexual violence, threats and intimidation or fraudulent debt from which workers cannot escape.

My recent investigative experience of forced labour in the shrimp industry in Andhra Pradesh suggests that workers who are paid less or unpaid for overtime, under the threat of being fired if they ask for it, are victims of forced labour. Workers who are forced to work until they have paid off a loan they took from the company are also victims of forced labour. Companies that withhold workers' identity documents, such as Aadhaar cards or ration cards, and deny them access to the documents when required until the work is done are also engaging in forced labour. Issuing threats of sexual, physical, or mental abuse in order to get the work done is also forced labour.

Addressing forced labour and modern day slavery is important for India because the exploitation of workers would increase inequality, unstable social justice and threaten democracy.

In addition, we should not forget that the move by the Union government to consolidate the

labour laws into four labour codes is drawing protests from trade unions, civil societies, and workers, who allege that it will have a negative impact on decent working conditions.

In India, there are 530 million workers, of whom 430 million are in the informal sector, who are prone to different forms of exploitation, especially forced labour.

This is not only an Indian problem. All G-20 countries face a similar situation. If we do not address the situation of workers, we will not be able to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals targets for 2030, especially the first one, which aims to eradicate poverty.

Without decent working conditions, how can a worker earn a living wage and keep themselves and their families out of poverty?

The Walk Free Foundation also reports that in 2021, the G-20 countries imported goods worth 41 lakh crore that were made by workers exploited under modern-day slavery. We as Indians do not care much about who made the product. However, we should not forget that products made under modern-day slavery will have the sweat, tears, and blood of workers who were forced to work under threat and inhumane conditions to make the products.

The G-20 should have discussed investments in job creation, compliance with the promise of the fundamental principles and rights at work, ensuring minimum living wages and equal pay, social protection for all with official development assistance, establishing equality of incomes, gender, and race, and coordinating action on inclusion as the basis of a rights-based development model realised through multilateral reform that deals with the threats to our peace and common security.

Unfortunately, not much happened. Workers were ignored, just as green curtains were used to screen out the dwellings of the poor that were near areas of G-20 summit events to avoid embarrassment about the reality.

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