
WORKERS IN THE SECOND WAVE

The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown on Local and Migrant
Workers in Bengaluru

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ALL INDIA CENTRAL COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS (AICCTU) – KARNATAKA

In collaboration with

Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU)

and

Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU)

MAY 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. Context for the study

The second wave of COVID-19 has hit our nation hard, particularly Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Karnataka. The situation in remaining states is also worsening by the day. In Karnataka, the situation is most alarming in Bengaluru with daily new COVID-19 cases increasing by 10,000+ numbers continuously from mid-April. However, the Central and State governments, miserably failed in anticipating this, let alone make any preparations to deal with it. Consequently, COVID-19 patients run from hospital to hospital in search of beds, especially ICU beds, there is an acute shortage of medication and oxygen, and no awareness or information among people on how to save their lives. Lives are lost due to the lack of preparedness and negligence of the State.

As of May 15, 2021, Karnataka had 6,05,494 active COVID-19 cases and had 21,434 COVID-19 deaths. Of these, more than 60% of the active COVID-19 cases i.e. 3,66,791 were in Bengaluru and, there were 9340 COVID-19 deaths in Bengaluru. With more than 3 lakh COVID-19 patients, Bengaluru has the highest number of COVID-19 cases among all cities in both waves. Bengaluru's first-wave peak was 66,854 active cases in mid-October — just a little over fifth of the present number. This explains why beds and oxygen are in acute shortage in the city. No government official or minister has provided reasons for the lack of preparation despite warnings from experts as early as in November.

We must remember that there were credible warning signals that a second wave was imminent. Historically, most pandemics have a second wave, as seen during Spanish flu of 1918-20, Asian Flu of 1957-58, West African Ebola of 2014-16. In fact, there were predictions about the second wave of COVID-19 in the report of Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) appointed by the government of Karnataka, as early as 24th November 2020. The report predicted that the second wave of COVID-19 was expected during January-February 2021 and detailed the measures needed to contain the second wave including scale of medical infrastructure required, extensive RT-PCR testing and expeditious procurement of newer testing kits. According to a TAC member and nodal officer for genomic confirmation of SARS-CoV-2 in Karnataka, the situation could have been controlled had report been taken seriously then or even in March this year.

The second wave has affected all sections of society, if twitter, newspaper reports, social media and our own experiences are valid to go by. However, the impact on the working class and economically weaker sections is particularly debilitating. Coupled with this battle to save their lives, people now are struggling to secure livelihoods and food as a direct consequence of the extended lockdown imposed by the State government.

II. About the study

It is in these circumstances that AICCTU felt the need for an authoritative account of the experiences of the people on both these fronts, for people to realise the enormity of the tragedy that has befallen us, and for the government to implement necessary policy interventions.

To be able to represent concerns of a diverse range of workers, we ensured that we spoke to diverse set of workers including Construction workers, Garment workers, Metro workers, Security guards, Workers in small shops, Waste pickers, Domestic workers, Taxi drivers, Library workers, MC Gang men, Street vendors, Hospital workers, Ready Mix Concrete workers, Powrakarmikas (Sanitation workers) and Auto drivers. The interviews happened over the phone between 1st May, 2021 and 6th May, 2021. We also documented and analysed newspaper reports and posts on twitter to ensure a comprehensive understanding.

III. Key Findings

1. Impact on health of Workers

- a) Workers are concentrated in slums and colonies, which are characterised by dense populations. The Government has failed to ensure adequate preventive steps and they have been left largely neglected.
- b) Most workplaces fail to provide adequate safety measures including masks and sanitisers. Sine most workers don't have access to regular testing or adequate access to health care in case of an infection, the majority of them are vulnerable to being infected by the coronavirus. After vaccinations for those below 45 years of age has been put on hold, workers are further vulnerable, since a large number of them are in this bracket (93.8% of the migrant workers interviewed are below 45 years)
- c) Vaccine hesitancy is significant. Workers are unsure of whether the vaccine is safe, and there are inadequate steps for awareness taken by the Government.
- d) There is large migrant workers population in the city, who are unfamiliar with Kannada and other local languages, due to which they face an additional barrier in accessing medical and health services.
- e) The fact that public health infrastructure in Karnataka, including Bangalore is largely neglected, with the private health infrastructure completely taking over has resulted in a large class of people unable to afford healthcare, and without access to it.

2. Impact on Wages and Livelihoods

- a) Working class households across the board have been impacted by the pandemic and the lockdown. There are several workers who contracted Covid resulting in increased expenditure and inability to earn a livelihood. This coupled with the extended lockdown resulting in loss or reduction of work of among earning members of the household has had a debilitating impact.
- b) Self-employed workers, particularly those working for platform companies such as Ola and Uber, waste-pickers or street vendors, and other unorganised workers such

as construction workers, are far more impacted than monthly wage workers in the government sector whose wages are protected to some extent. Contract workers in the public or private sector too have been hit badly.

- c) In several instances, including where the State agencies is the employer, wages have not been paid for previous periods. There is also uncertainty about whether wages will be paid for the lockdown period, and if there will be any reduction. Pending wages is a critical issue for workers
- d) There is an overall crisis in employment and livelihoods. Work opportunities are decreasing, wages are falling, employers are cutting down on the number of workers they employ resulting in an extra burden of work for the workers who are retained. Despite enormous risks that follow working in a pandemic, workers are not paid any form of allowance for the same, and have also not been able to demand higher wages, due to fears of termination and being placed in a worse situation.
- e) Rent and loan repayments are causing anxiety among workers since most access rented housing and are dependent on loans to meet household and education expenses. House owners are not agreeable to accommodate delayed payments beyond 1-2 months and expecting them to defer payments for extended periods of time is not realistic.
- f) Accommodation provided by construction companies, both private and public including Bengaluru Smart City Limited, BMRL and other companies does not match with the basic human needs. It is congested and does not support the necessary physical distance to be maintained in these times. It places the workers in a condition of precarity.

3. Impact on Food Security

- a) Food security of working classes is severely compromised by the loss and reduction of income due to the pandemic-induced lockdowns.
- b) Increase in prices of vegetables, meat and groceries are further depleting capacity of working class households to access nutritious food sources.
- c) Severely inadequate rations provided through the public distribution system has meant that households are not able to be entirely reliant on state assistance for food during the pandemic.

4. Expectations from the government

Workers have expressed that the government must at the minimum take the following steps in order to ensure their survival:

- a) Extending EMIs on loans, if not loan waivers.
- b) Controlling inflation of prices in essential commodities
- c) Ensuring payment of compensation upon injury or death of an earning member in the family.
- d) Helping in procuring medicines.

- e) Provide PF, ESI and other health benefits.
- f) Increase quantum of ration provided from the PDS.
- g) Providing ration kits.
- h) Cash assistance to enable meeting daily and monthly expenses for groceries, food and rent.
- i) Waiver of electricity and water bills for the period of the lockdown.
- j) Setting up more COVID-19 care centres with better amenities.
- k) Increasing employment opportunities.
- l) Impose lockdown only if necessary

A significant percentage of migrant workers do not have any expectation from the government. This is not because there is no expectation, rather it is a grim acknowledgment that the government would not do anything for them.

IV. Conclusions

That the irrational and undemocratic lockdown of March 2020 devastated Indian economy in an unprecedented manner is well documented. As per a study by the Pew Institute, as a consequence, the number of poor increased by 75 million. This is nothing short of alarming.

The dire state of workers in India after the lockdown and first round of the pandemic was documented in detail in the report titled 'State of Working India 2021' published by the Azim Premji University. The report states that *"...Our analysis shows that the pandemic has further increased informality and led to a severe decline in earnings for the majority of workers resulting in a sudden increase in poverty. Women and younger workers have been disproportionately affected. Households have coped by reducing food intake, borrowing, and selling assets. Government relief has helped avoid the most severe forms of distress, but the reach of support measures is incomplete, leaving out some of the most vulnerable workers and households. We find that additional government support is urgently needed now for two reasons - compensating for the losses sustained during the first year and anticipating the impact of the second wave..."*

In spite of this, there has been no attempts to address the needs of the working class by the central government or the government of Karnataka over the past year. A comment by one of the street vendors of Bengaluru Jilla Beedhi Vyapari Sanghatanegala Okkuta, Shri Madegowda was telling – "Earlier, if a family of four came, they would buy four plates of chaat. Now they buy just one plate and the kids share, the parents don't eat. No one has money to spend". This was the situation before the second wave.

Now the second wave and the state-imposed lockdowns have further exacerbated the situation. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, India's leading business information company, has reported that April 2021 has turned out to be worse than expectations with the labour participation rate dropping sharply as a result of the local lockdowns in several states and the inability of the economy to provide adequate jobs since the second wave of Covid-19 has stalled economic recovery.

The third aspect is the lack of learning from the experiences and impact of last year's lockdown. Karnataka has imposed an extended lockdown without announcing any package for the working class to protect their food and economic needs.

Perhaps the most tragic is that instead of anticipating and preparing for the second wave, the governments at the state and centre, and the Prime Minister as well, repeatedly declared victory over the pandemic.

The devastated economy and the unscientific, callous nature of the response of the state to the pandemic are two aspects to keep in mind as we begin to understand the current situation.

1. Wages, Livelihoods and food security

The 2020 lockdown already had a far reaching impact on the workers. Pre and post the 2020 lockdown, wages have already seen a reduction in job security and wages. Given that 86.9% of the workforce in the State are informal workers it is obvious that denial of work implies a total debilitation of their families. The large number of self-employed (45.6%) and casual labourers (27.2%) have suffered even more tremendously over the past few weeks. The wage earners (27.2%) have also been affected badly. In several sectors like the garments industry, several factories have reduced the workforce but increased the workload on the retained workers, adding a lot of pressure and burden on the workers to perform as per requirement or face retrenchment. Workers have always had the weaker hand at bargaining for better wages and work conditions, which the 2020 lockdown has exacerbated.

Repeated restrictions and lockdowns, however necessary they are for to control the spread of the coronavirus has also affected the mobility of workers within the city, especially street vendors, waste-pickers, construction workers, domestic workers, etc. to reach their places of work. For migrant workers, the uncertainty of the lockdowns, living outside their homes with no income has meant that they either have lived in Bangalore without work but incurring expenses here or going home and waiting for the situation to improve and not being able find adequate work in their home towns.

Just as work was picking up, the current lockdown has been a nail in the coffin. The lockdown has been necessitated due to the negligence and unpreparedness of the government to take care of the health requirements of the second wave. This has further affected the work available and impacted the extent of wages paid.

Our survey documented the fact that the lockdown has caused the same kinds of issues like last time – workers not being paid for full month, self-employed and daily-wage earners having no income for instance. But what is to be noted is that neither did the government do anything to anticipate this nor did they do anything to address it once the issues cropped up. The Rural

Development and Panchayat Raj minister Shri Eshwarappa, when asked for monthly relief to be paid to workers even said *"Are we printing notes that we can pay people?"*

The loss of wages has created food and nutritional insecurity of alarming proportions.

This being the case it was only expected that this is an issue to be addressed. Last year, the government supplied ration kits to needy families but insists that this year cooked food packets will be supplied through Indira canteens. Even here, the government is not concerned about how the workers will reach the Indira canteens, which are the sites for food distribution. That aside is the indignity that is heaped on hard-working people to stand in a line three times a day for a meal. While workers we spoke to were very clear that they expected at least food supplies to be provided through the PDS system, the government has done little in this regard. While the government has now announced that the quantity of rice will be doubled, they are not even willing to supply Dal or vegetable oil.

No proactive steps have been taken by the government to secure the rights and welfare of the workers.

As a result of the callous and unconcerned attitude of the government, workers today are left with grappling with the illness on the one hand and surviving daily life on the other. There is a serious crisis of cash flow affecting their ability to pay rent, purchase provisions and repay loans, sometimes taken for something as necessary as education of their children. There is a resultant anxiety for some and a sense of having given up on hope for others. A stark and revealing reality is that the workers having felt let down by the government repeatedly has left them without any expectations from the government.

2. COVID-19: Prevention, Treatment and Vaccination

Our study showed that workers faced several obstacles in dealing with COVID-19. It appears that in the past year, there has neither been a ramping up of public health facilities nor any preventive measures. In fact our study shows that public health facilities like testing were less than last year. There seems to be no lessons learnt in managing the pandemic. Last year, the government had analysed how Triaging was most important and it had to be done locally, this year triage centres were opened in May second week only.

We must remember that workers stay in congested areas, whether in accommodation provided by the employer or places they rent on their own. They are therefore far more vulnerable to contracting COVID. The one weapon they have against the virus is vaccination. It is condemnable that the government has made no concerted effort to vaccinate those living in such congested areas. Among the local workers 85% were from the age 31-50 age group and for migrant workers, 93% were below 45 years. This makes a very small percentage of workers eligible for vaccination as the current policy of the government. moreover, there is no targeted testing in

worker colonies and slums nor is any fumigation done, let alone any awareness campaign or distribution of masks/sanitizers, etc.

While many patients in the city, even from the middle and upper class, who has contracted the virus have struggled to find ambulances, ICU and oxygenated beds, ventilators, medicines and slots in crematoriums, workers stand at another level of disadvantage. Limited knowledge and access to helplines and facilities of the government and voluntary organisations, has affected the prognosis and outcome of the illness. Migrant workers face a double whammy since language barriers and a biased attitude prohibits information to percolate to these communities. It is poignant when atleast 2 workers said that they cannot expect anything from the Karnataka government since they are from West Bengal.

V. Summary of Recommendations:

1. Health aspects:

- i. The government must take proactive steps to ensure safe living condition for workers, including undertaking regular fumigation of these areas, have intense awareness campaigns and equip each colony / areas with adequate primary care facilities. Periodical testing should also be done so that early detection of the illness is possible thereby arresting its spread.
- ii. An Intensive testing exercise is essential in workplaces, public places and near residences of working classes.
- iii. Public health infrastructure, especially COVID-19 care centres, hospitals and health Centres, on which the working class entirely depend on, need to be upgraded and expanded extensively. The medical infrastructure including oxygen, beds, and medicines must be ramped up.
- iv. Universal free vaccination should be provided within a fixed period of time. Free vaccination camps must be organised in all labour camps, worker colonies, migrant worker colonies and slums. Public health messaging on the need for vaccines is necessary to build confidence among workers.
- v. All Covid deaths among BPL families ought to be paid compensation of Rs. 10 lakhs.
- vi. Provide free COVID testing camps in, and weekly sanitisation of, all slums, working class layouts and colonies, migrant and construction worker labour camps and colonies, along with distribution of masks and sanitizers across the State.
- vii. Persons required to undergo home quarantine must be provided with "Home Quarantine Kits". This must be provided free of cost to families who cannot afford the same.
- viii. Covid Care Centers must be increased in number for more decentralization and must be established at ward/community level with adequate beds and facilities to ensure proper isolation and treatment of COVID patients free of cost. The CCC shall be the first point of contact for those requiring hospitalization and have emergency oxygen stock as well as necessary medications. Arrangements for any person requiring hospitalization including ICU shall be provided by the CCC.
- ix. All treatment and medical arrangements shall be provided free of cost.

- x. Intense information dissemination that reaches all persons, including through public announcements, tom-toms, TV broadcasts, circulation of official videos, and posters on social media and WhatsApp. Steps must be taken to increase awareness regarding the helpline numbers. In doing this the Government must also reach migrant workers. Communicate must be made in all local languages and in regard to migrant workers, the languages that they speak.

2. Protecting life and livelihoods

- i. Government must declare a COVID Compensation package for all BPL families, residents of slums (identified, declared or otherwise), contract and casual workers receiving wages below Rs. 15,000/-, domestic workers, street vendors, construction workers, waste-pickers, manual scavengers, Powrakarmikas, garment workers, plantation workers and other sections of the unorganised sector.
- ii. Government must pass necessary orders prohibiting termination of worker and mandating payment of full wages during lockdown, and taking immediate steps against the employer for failing to ensure the same.
- iii. Labour Department must set up a helpline for workers who are not paid wages and who have complaints in regard to termination, and immediate remedial steps must be taken.
- iv. Government must pass necessary orders on delayed payment of rents, loan repayment moratoriums, loan waivers, waiver of electricity and water bills.
- v. The State Government must declare sector-specific assistance to migrant workers, hospital and frontline workers, sanitation workers, domestic workers, cab and auto drivers, gig workers, garment workers, street vendors, etc. including risk allowance of Rs. 10,000/- to all healthcare/frontline workers and other workers who are compelled to work in these times.

3. Protecting food security

- i. In addition to the Indira Canteens, the State Government must immediately begin free distribution of ration kits consisting of rice, wheat, ragi, masala, cooking oil, salt, sugar, etc. to suffice for a period of one month. The Government must also implement the Pradhan Mantri Gharib Kalyan Anna Yojana to all persons in PDS shops without insistence on ration cards, and ensure provision of 10 kgs of rice. The Government must take steps to ensure that the ration-kit reaches all persons, including migrant workers.
- ii. Per the BBMP's decision to provide food packets at Indira Canteens, steps must be taken to ensure that those households that are located far away from the Indira Canteens, are also ensured the provision of the same.
- iii. Community kitchens should be set up to ensure decentralization of food assistance by working with street vendors who can set up such kitchens.

- iv. The Government must set up a help-line that caters to food security specifically, and must ensure provision of food in a time-bound manner on receiving any such requests. Publicity must be given to these helplines.