

NATIONAL

Workers demand implementation of policy for migrants

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

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They say almost a year after COVID-19-induced lockdown, govt. has not kept its promises



A group of hawkers, sex workers, domestic workers, rescued bonded labourers and other unorganised workers gathered at Jantar Mantar here on Thursday, almost a year after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19, setting off a crisis for migrant workers, to demand that the government fulfil the promises made during the pandemic.

“Sex workers had no resources to survive the lockdown as they live on daily earnings,” said Kusum, of the All-India Network of Sex Workers at the protest organised by the Working People’s Charter. “The government sent food to schools, but they didn’t see that workers lived several kilometres away. As long as we are dying of hunger, there is no Atmanirbhar Bharat. How can I say my country is great?”

She said migrant workers were unable to access many of the government's schemes for lack of documents. She demanded a one-time income support of ₹10,000 for all unorganised workers.

Bonded labour

Nitin Kumar, a resident of Muzaffarnagar who had been working as a labourer in Haridwar, said he, along with others from his village, were left without any income in 2020 as their employer refused to pay them their pending dues when the lockdown was imposed. After having walked home in the early days of the pandemic, he said the group made its way to Rajpura in Punjab after the lockdown was lifted to work in a brick unit. There, he said, the group was once again pushed into bonded labour till an NGO came to their rescue after four-and-a-half-months.

“We were forced to take loans to survive. We would only get ₹1,000 every 25 days from the employer. But, we had no choice, as we could not find any other work. When we left, I was owed at least ₹25,000,” he said.

Another worker from Muzaffarnagar, Sharmila, said she had taken ₹20,000 as loan from local money lenders and had no way of paying back. “We received no help from the government. All that workers want is work. But there was no work,” she said.

Pushpa Devi, a resident of the homeless shelter near Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in Delhi, said workers only wanted “our rights” and dignity. “When the lockdown was announced, we were treated like animals. The food we were given made us fall ill,” she said.

Policy for workers

Chandan Kumar, national coordinator of the Working Peoples' Charter, said the condition of the working poor was “alarming”. Though the NITI Aayog had come up with a draft policy for migrant workers, it was yet to be notified and implemented. He said the Centre must allocate funds to implement the policy immediately.

Nirmal Agni, general secretary of Bandhua Mukti Morcha, said workers would come together to protest on the eve of the lockdown anniversary, on March 23, if the government failed to implement the policy.

After the protest, the workers sent a memorandum to Labour Minister Santosh Kumar Gangwar and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, demanding implementation of the migrant workers' policy, recognition of sex work and domestic work, end to evictions from slums, construction of workers' hostels in all districts and registration of all migrant workers.

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